

NOTE ON *WHAT I BELIEVE* AND REPLY

ANTONIO MALO* · ANTHONY KENNY**

SOME CRITICAL REMARKS

ANTONIO MALO

WHAT *I believe*¹ is a sort of philosophical memoir. The author, Sir Anthony Kenny, deals in this work with some of the most important topics in both the history of philosophy and human existence. God, human beings, life and death, war, sex, morality and happiness are a few among others.

At the beginning of the book, Kenny offers us the key to understanding his whole thinking about all of these topics. He is neither a theist nor an atheist. Instead, he is an agnostic. According to him, neither the stronger claim against God's existence, nor the weaker one in its favor, has been convincingly established. This does not mean that Kenny puts himself in the middle between theists and atheists like a judge. In fact, he is closer to the theist position because the theist makes a less strong claim than the atheist does in so far as «the theist only claims that there is some definition which will make 'God exists' true», «while the atheist claims that no matter what definition you choose, 'God exists' is always false» (p. 21).

In my opinion, it is in this last sentence where Kenny's central belief is manifested. In his view, it is not reality which makes logic express truth, but it is human logic that makes reality to be true. But is logic what makes reality true or is reality what makes logic express its truth?

The dependence of logic on reality is particularly evident in all of the proofs where one tries to show that his belief corresponds to reality. Such is the case when I try to prove that I was born, I exist now, or that I'll die. The dependence of logic on reality is evident in all these proofs which are related to existence.

In order to deal with this question, I will proceed in a twofold manner. First, I will give some biographical information to understand why Kenny considers that if someone cannot defend his belief through logic, his or her faith is not a

* Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, Facoltà di Filosofia, Piazza Sant'Apollinare, 49, 00186 Roma, Italia. E-mail: malo@pusc.it

** St. John's College, Oxford, OX1 3JP U.K. E-mail: anthonyjpkenny@gmail.com

¹ A. KENNY, *What I believe*, Continuum, London-New York 2006.

virtue but something vicious. Secondly, I will indicate some limits of the logic in the demonstration of reality.

1. LIFE AND BELIEF

In the first chapter of his work entitled, *The Story of My Ideas*, Kenny, who was born in Liverpool in 1931, recalls how he spent his years as a seminarian first in the junior school at Upholland (Archdiocese of Liverpool), and then in the English College in Rome, while he took courses in philosophy and theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University (1949-1952). Later on, after his ordination as a priest (1955), Kenny was a resident graduate student at Oxford University, where he obtained an academic position after leaving the priesthood and returning to the lay state (1963).

In 1978, after having been a philosophy tutor at Balliol for fourteen years, he became Master of the College in 1978, and from that date until his retirement he was more of an academic administrator than a teacher. After his retirement, he became Warden of Rhodes Scholarships. While holding each of these positions he was a member of the governing Council of the University of Oxford, and after retiring from Rhodes House he was briefly Oxford's Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Development. He served also as President of the British Academy and Chair of the Board of the British Library, and published more than forty books. Since 2001 he has been fully retired and has had once again ample time for writing.

Perhaps the cause for Kenny's first doubt of "God's existence" lies in the weight that he has attributed to logic. As he tells us, «in the 1950s, candidates for a doctorate in Papal universities had to swear to a document called the anti-modernist oath, which contained the statement that it was possible to prove the existence of God. Though I had submitted a dissertation and passed the examinations, I was unwilling to proceed to the degree because I did not wish to take this oath. If God's existence could be known, I very much doubted whether it would be known by way of proof. Since then I have studied arguments for the existence of God presented by many philosophers, and I have not yet found a convincing one» (p. 31).

Kenny's decision not to take the anti-modernist oath underlines both his honesty and what I think could be called an excessive trust in the power of his own reason. It is true that a Christian philosopher is obliged to try to seek whether the proofs of God's existence are convincing. However, a real theist does not believe in God because he finds some definition that makes the claim 'God exists' to be true. Instead, a real theist tries to express through human logic that his belief is rational. In other words, for a real theist there are good reasons to believe that God exists. Saint Thomas says that the rational proofs for God's existence do not belong properly speaking to faith but to the *pream-*

bula fidei, that is, to some natural truths whose acceptance predisposes one to faith. If I am not able to find these proofs or if I am not convinced by them, my belief does not become irrational. These proofs do not grant my belief its very rationality; they are only its expression. In light of this, I therefore disagree with Kenny when he states: «in my view, faith is not a virtue, but a vice, unless certain conditions are fulfilled. One is that the existence of God can be rationally established without appeal to faith. Accepting something as a matter of faith is taking God's word for its truth: but one cannot take God's word for it that He exists» (p. 59).

I think Kenny does not distinguish accurately between fideism and rationalism. Fideism is a religious belief which can be against reason or at least does not get on with reason because it excludes the necessity of giving any *obsequium rationis* to what God reveals to us. On the other hand, rationalism eliminates any distinction between the human and the divine sphere by trying to reduce truth to what can be understood through human knowledge. Although fideism and rationalism are at the two extreme poles, they share the same belief: namely, that it is impossible to reconcile human reason with faith and faith with human reason.

2. NATURAL SELECTION CANNOT EXPLAIN EVERYTHING

In order to show that atheists and theists are both wrong, Kenny discusses their different explanation of three cosmological changes or transformations: the development of language in human beings, the origin of life, and the big bang.

First, Kenny explains why a natural explanation of these three phenomena, which many scientists rely on, are not convincing. According to him, the natural explanation, (in contrast to the 'supernatural' one), is based on Darwinism and especially on the principle of natural selection. The most fashionable atheists «claim that the origin and structure of the world and the emergence of human life and human institutions are already fully explained by science, so that no room is left for postulating the existence of activity of any non-natural agent» (p. 23).

Kenny does not agree with the neo-Darwinian pretension of explaining the entire cosmos, because there are some aspects of it that cannot be reduced to natural selection. Kenny finds the neo-Darwinian *natural* explanation of the origin of language problematic because of the very conventional character of language itself. The core of his argument is as follows: one cannot use the principle of natural selection in order to explain the origin of language because this principle requires individuals, who have adapted themselves to achieve certain properties, to perpetuate themselves. But these properties cannot be described if the starting point of language is individual. In other

words, language needs a community of language-users before anyone can be described as a language-using individual at all. This means that the behavior of language-users is governed by conventions and the activities of countless other users. In light of this he therefore states: «If we reflect on the social and conventional nature of language, we find something odd in the idea that language may have evolved because of the advantages possessed by language users over non-language users. It seems as absurd as the idea that banks may have evolved because those born with an innate cheque-writing ability were better off than those born without it» (p. 25).

With respect to life itself, furthermore, Kenny expresses difficulties in understanding how it could have originated by natural selection: he states: «However successful natural selection may be in explaining the origin of particular species of life, it clearly cannot explain how there came to be such things as species at all» (p. 26).

The reason for Kenny's perplexity is simple: one cannot explain how breeding populations came to be true, since the existence of such populations is one of the premises on which explanations in terms of natural selection rest as their starting point. Nevertheless, he adds, «this is not to say that neo-Darwinians do not offer explanations of the origin of life; of course they do, but they are explanations of a radically different kind. All such explanations try to explain life as produced by the chance interaction of non-living materials and forces subject to purely physical laws. These accounts, whatever their merits, are not explanations by natural selection» (p. 26-27). In other words, *chance* as the cause of interaction does not belong to the realm of scientific explanation, but to that of metaphysical consideration.

Finally, his third argument against atheism comes from the big bang or the explosion of an extremely dense fireball of elementary particles that would have begun our universe. Kenny agrees with the following metaphysical proposition: a being that begins to exist at some point in time needs an explanation, that is, a cause of its coming into existence. For that, it would be perverse simply to shrug one's shoulders and decline to seek any explanation: «We would never, in the case of an ordinary existent, tolerate a blithe announcement that there was simply no reason for it coming into existence; and it seems irrational to abandon this principle when the existing thing in question is all pervasive, like the universe» (p. 29).

Since there is no good natural explanation for these changes, he argues, it seems that one cannot exclude the possibility of a "supernatural explanation", namely, an explanation of the origin of the big bang, life and language based on divine action. Nevertheless he considers these proofs not to be rigorous.

The reason why Kenny doesn't accept the big bang as a rigorous proof of God's existence is that it is possible to make a hypothesis in which God is not necessary as follows: if the big bang was preceded by a vacuum, God would

not be necessary since a vacuum may not be nothingness. According to Kenny, a vacuum may be a real being or beings, not a mental being or an idea. A vacuum may have as much status in being as a photon or elementary particle.

Along the same vein, he considers neither the argument of the origin of language nor the argument of the origin of life to be a rigorous proof, because in his view, God appears only as a hypothesis for explaining something that naturally is non-understandable. And, as Kenny says, it's easier to accept ignorance than knowledge because «a claim to knowledge needs to be substantiated; ignorance needs only be confessed» (p. 21).

I agree with Kenny that God's existence cannot be used as a way of filling holes in human knowledge. For that reason none of these three phenomena is a real proof for God's existence. At best they are only a possibility. Nevertheless, I think it is possible to purify the big bang phenomenon by reducing it to a metaphysical proof, that of the contingency of the world.

And so, let us try to do it. First I think that if scientists could show that the world comes from nothing, a good proof of God's existence would not be too far-fetched since in order to bring the world into existence, an infinite potency would be required. But unfortunately it is impossible to prove such a claim as scientists can only observe natural phenomena and nothingness is simply not one of them.

Of course, nothingness should not be mistaken for a physical vacuum. The latter has a real relation to the universe, while nothingness has no relation to it at all. For this reason, I think that the physical vacuum which Kenny speaks of is only an abstraction of our material universe. Only a metaphysical illusion can lead to think of an empty space as a reality: space without a material world is as impossible as a material world without space. Nevertheless, the big bang theory cannot exclude that before the explosion there was another world that could have collapsed and consequently the big bang theory cannot exclude the eternity of the universe. This means that the big bang is not a good proof for God's existence unless one realizes that the world, which supposedly originated by the explosion, is a contingent world. In my opinion, the argument of the contingency of the world is the main cosmological proof in favor for God's existence. But then again, the contingency of the world is not a scientific proof but a metaphysical one.

3. THERE ARE NO RATIONAL PROOFS IN FAVOR FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE

Kenny's wide knowledge of the History of Philosophy allows him to gather most of the rational proofs in favor for God's existence. He criticizes every one of them with brilliant rhetoric. In the end, he considers that the cosmological proof of *Summa Contra Gentes* is the most promising one even though he still tries to show its weakness.

According to Kenny, the argument runs thus. Every existing thing has a reason for its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature, or in the causal efficacy of some other beings. «Suppose that A is an existing, natural thing, a member of a (perhaps beginningless) series of causes and effects that in its own nature is disposed indifferently to either existence or not existence. The reason for A's present existence must be in the causal efficacy of other beings. However many beings may be contributing to A's present existence, they could not be reason for it if there were not some first cause at the head of the series — something such that everything other than it must be traced back to it as the cause of its being» (p. 39).

Although Kenny considers that this argument is very persuasive, he thinks that it contains a logical weakness. «What is meant by saying that A is 'disposed indifferently to either existence or non-existence'? If it means 'disposed indifferently to going on existing or not', then the contingent beings of the everyday world, from which the argument starts, do not fit the bill. Contingent things aren't of their nature equally disposed to exist or not: on the contrary, most things naturally tend to remain in existence. On the other hand, if it means 'disposed indifferently to come into existence or not', then we lapse into absurdity: before A exists there isn't any such thing as a non-existing A to have, or to lack, a tendency to come into existence» (p. 39-40).

I think Kenny's objection comes from a misinterpretation of the concept of contingency. In order to show that I will quote Aquinas' text: «We observe that in the world there are certain things which can be and not be, namely those that are subject to generation and corruption. Now whatsoever is possible to be has a cause, because, as in itself it is equally related to two things, namely being and not being, it follows that if it acquires being this is the result of some cause. But as proved above by Aristotle's argument, we cannot go on to infinity in causes. Therefore we must suppose some thing, which is necessary to be. Now every necessary thing either has a cause of its necessity from without, or has no such cause, but is necessary of itself. But we cannot go on to infinity in necessary things that have causes of their necessity from without. Therefore we must suppose some first necessary thing which is necessary of itself: and this is God, since He is the first cause, as proved above. Therefore God is eternal, since whatever is necessary of itself is eternal» (C.G., 15, n. 5).

To be contingent does not mean to be disposed indifferently to either existence or non-existence, but to be a finite being, namely, a being that needs a cause. That is why Kenny's objection sounds a little surprising. In fact, although contingent beings of the everyday world tend to remain in existence, they have a finite existence, which in itself cannot be explained, for they could have not existed. On the other hand, non existing things, as Kenny points out, do not have any tendency, because they are not at all. Nevertheless, if they are finite beings, there was a time in which they did not exist.

Perhaps Kenny's misinterpretation depends on an empirical way of understanding existence like a pure fact. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, existence is not only act, but it is also the act of every act. Finite being is contingent because it is not pure existence, but it has a metaphysical composition of two correlative principles: essence and existence. The essence of a being is not something added onto its existence, but the very limitation of the act of existence which a finite being has.

This composition explains why finite beings depend necessarily on a cause. They need a cause because they cannot at the same time exist and limit their existence. In other words, the principle why they exist is different from the principle why they are finite. That is why a finite being needs as a cause an Infinite Being, which is pure act of existence. The Infinite Being who does not have any kind of composition is pure act of existence. He is the principle why He exists. For that reason He does not need any cause; hence, He is necessary.

Moreover, the existence of a necessary Being does not depend on the ontological argument as Kenny seems to suggest: «For what is meant by 'necessary being'? Surely, a being in whom essence involves existence, that is to say, a being whose existence can be established by the ontological argument» (p. 37). The existence of a necessary Being depends only on a metaphysical proof. For that reason, a refutation of the arguments for God's existence which does not consider the contingency of finite beings and the self-sufficiency of an Infinite Being is not a refutation at all.

4. A SORT OF *DOCTA IGNORANTIA*

In the other topics, Kenny tries to keep this sort of *docta ignorantia*. In this way, he avoids both the apparent dogmatism of Christian ethics and the relativism of the *politically correct*. He defends principles like "adultery is always a bad behavior", "everyone pursues happiness", "homosexual culture is not to be encouraged", "there are just wars", etc. Surprisingly he even accepts double effect actions.

What is the origin of all these apparently opposite beliefs? Apart from his confessed agnosticism in relation to God's existence, there is a second source for Kenny's ideas related to human issues: his conception of the human being as a unity of body and soul. Of course, he does not mean that the soul is a spirit; otherwise it would be very difficult not to affirm God's existence.

Kenny borrows from Aristotle his conception of both the unity of the human being and of virtue. The result of these two sets of ideas is both an anthropology and an ethics that are very close to Christian moral teaching. An example of this closeness is his criticism against Cartesian dualism and behavioral monism. In fact, the most important issues in Ethics now, like *in*

vitro fertilization, stem cell research and human cloning, to mention a few in the area of Bioethics, can be traced back both to a Cartesian dualist mindset and to behaviorism. According to such an outlook, the human body would be reducible to pure matter, in such a way that the human body would be able to be used as a mere instrument to cure diseases or to improve the human condition. Kenny criticizes those who use their body purely as an instrument for pleasure or utility because a person does not have a human body, but he or she is a human body.

However, there is an important difference between Kenny's proposal and Catholic moral teaching. According to Kenny, «moral rules, like linguistic rules, may change as society changes, but unless a set of rules is in operation society collapses into anarchy as language collapses into incoherence» (p. 81). I find in this quotation something strange, above all when one compares it to another of Kenny's affirmations such as this one: «I agree with Aristotle that there can be no such thing as the right time and place and person for the commission of adultery» (p. 140). How is it possible to ban some acts, like adultery, if the moral rules may change as society changes?

It seems to me that, in contrast to language, some ethical norms depend on something permanent, the individual and social structure of human nature; and hence, in Catholicism and in Natural Law the prohibition of killing an innocent no matter if he or she is an embryo, a person with a serious handicap, someone who is terminally ill or an old man or woman who is not self-sufficient. Kenny is in favor of the supreme value of human life, but his agnosticism and the absence of any natural law in his ethics, prevent him from defending life from its beginning to its end by means of rational argumentation.

Nevertheless, he uses an important argument in favor of the social aspect of natural law. When speaking about the liberal Catholics who raise objections to traditional Catholic teaching he finds it difficult to make logical sense of their position: «How could the Roman Catholic Church ever be taken seriously again as a moral authority? If a doctrine taught so solemnly, and at a cost of such suffering, can turn out to be so mistaken, what reliance can be placed on any other moral doctrine?» (p. 61). In other words, according to Kenny, moral authority, although it has caused a lot of trouble during history, can be kept only if it's not wrong. But this same argument should then be used to show that ethical relativism, which is causing so many innocent victims, could have moral authority only if it is right with independence from time and space. But, of course, this absolutist sounding premise goes against the very core of the relativist creed.

I think Kenny is very close to moral Catholic teaching, closer than he thinks. Perhaps he should consider revising some aspects of this teaching. For instance, he considers that the Decalogue leads to an emphasis on the prohibitive aspect of morality. He is right if the commandments are understood as

a listing of actions to be altogether ruled out. But the Decalogue does not stress the minimum necessary for moral decency; it indicates the limits that a person should not crossover if he or she wants to live with the dignity of a human being. Of course the perfection of the moral life cannot be negative, as it clearly appears in the first commandment, the commandment of love. It is necessary therefore to underline the minimum level of morality, below which it is impossible to act as a person.

Another aspect of Kenny's teaching that would be good to reconsider in my opinion is his concept of happiness. Kenny does not believe in life after death because such life implies the subsistence of the human soul without a body, and above all, because an eternal life appears to him more of a punishment than true happiness. It's true that it's very difficult to understand how the human soul can live without a body. Saint Thomas offers an explanation when he conceives the soul as a substantial form, which has act of being in itself, while the body receives it from the soul. For this reason the soul can subsist without a body, although the soul always has a tendency towards it. This inclination of the soul to his or her own body could give an answer to Kenny's objection: «Christian tradition has held out hope of an eventual universal resurrection: but a body resembling mine a millennium hence would not be my body. Unless one believes in the possibility of a disembodied soul in the interim, there is nothing to link that resurrection body with the mortal one in which I now live» (p. 164). According to Saint Thomas, the resurrected body will be our own body because its individuality has been saved in a certain way by the inclination of the soul towards it: «Now the soul separated from the body is still somewhat dependent on the body, wherefore its movement towards God is retarded on account of its desire for the body, as Augustine says (Gen. ad lit. xii)» (*S. Th., Supplementum tertiae partis*, q. 78, a. 3).

All in all, I agree with Kenny's three notes to describe happiness: free choice, worthwhile activity, and prestige. Kenny explains their meaning very accurately. Man's happiness depends on his capacity for acting freely and being recognized and loved by others. When Kenny speaks about happiness, he uses different examples taken from human love: free choice in marriage, happy marriage... Like Kenny, I think that the core of happiness is related to love.

5. CONCLUSION

Every finite reality and every its production or activity has limits. Logic, as a product of human reason, shares this same characteristic with the rest of finite realities. The limits of logic come not only from the limits of human reason on which it depends, but also from temporality. Hence, principles, concepts and, above all, the existence of world and human beings are not a matter of logic.

If finite existence overcomes logical rules, it seems surprising to try to probe God's existence through logic, because God is a necessary being, that is, his existence does not need any explanation.

Perhaps someone, like Kenny, could think that the exclusion of God's existence from a logical proof is very dangerous because it introduces in our life room for irrationality, fanaticism and intolerance. I think that such a fear is unmotivated. First of all because to accept principles that cannot be demonstrated logically like the principle of non-contradiction, the existence of the world or the own existence is not against rationality or tolerance but it is in its favor; moreover it is at its own bases. Secondly to accept God, who is the origin of all creatures, leads man to humility and love.

I think Kenny will agree with me when I say that also his *Docta ignorantia* in relation to eternity has a limit, love. When someone loves, he cannot refuse the reality of his beloved nor doubted of him. Lovers want their beloveds to be immortal. Would not Kenny like to have an eternity loving perfectly, not only people whom he loved on earth, but also all those who, as he, will be eternally loved by God?

REPLY TO PROFESSOR MALO'S CRITICAL REMARKS

ANTHONY KENNY

Let me begin by saying that I do not at all accept what is described as my "central belief", namely that human logic makes reality to be true. I believe that the laws of logic (e.g. the law of non-contradiction, and the principles of quantification) hold of all reality, human and non-human. To be sure the laws of logic are also laws of thought (normative laws), but that is because they already hold true of reality: they are *leges mentis* because they are *leges entis*.

I do not claim that it is, or should be, possible to prove the existence of something by pure logic. Proofs of existence, in general, depend on the operation of logic upon experience. Certainly, that is the way in which St Thomas's five ways operate: he takes a fact of experience (e.g. that some things are in motion, or that non-rational creatures aim at a goal) and uses logic to draw conclusions from such facts. The conclusions offer definitions of God (e.g. prime mover) which, if the proofs are successful, show "God exists to be true".

It is misleading to say "for a real theist there are good reasons to believe that God exists". This seems to imply that whether the reasons for believing that God exists are good reasons is a subjective matter. But it is an objective matter whether there are such good reasons, and if there are not then the "real theist" is mistaken. In my book *The Five Ways* I tried to show that the reasons St Thomas' offers are not good enough reasons.

When I say "one cannot take God's word for it that he exists" I mean that to take something as being God's word implies a prior belief that there is a God.

I am here simply agreeing with St Thomas when he says that the proofs of God's existence belong not to faith but to the *praeambula fidei*.

I do not understand the views that are attributed to me about the vacuum: I do not recall ever mentioning a vacuum in my book.

You say that "to be contingent does not mean to be disposed indifferently to either existence or non-existence, but to be a finite being, namely, a being that needs a cause". But it is precisely the claim that a contingent being is disposed indifferently to either existence or non existence (*aequaliter se habet ad suo, scilicet esse et non esse*) that St Thomas offers as the premise from which he derives the conclusion that it needs a cause of its existence.

Much as I admire St Thomas, I think that his teaching on essence and existence is in the end incoherent. I have argued this at length in my book *Aquinas on Being*; there is a summary of my argument in a shorter paper which I send you in another attachment. But I don't myself believe that a necessary being is one whose essence involves existence: the passage you quote from my p. 37 is a paraphrase of Kant.

I do not think that there is an inconsistency in thinking that some actions are absolutely ruled out for us which might not be ruled out in a society that was structured in a totally different way from ours. This was surely the line that St Thomas and other doctors took in discussing the polygamy of the patriarchs.

My third element of happiness was dignity, not prestige. Prestige is only one, and the least important, factor in dignity (see p. 156)

The principle reason that I am not a theist is not because arguments for the existence of God have weaknesses: it is because I think the notion of God presented by traditional theism is incoherent. I argued this in a book *The God of the Philosophers*, and I summarise my arguments on pp. 49-53 of *What I Believe*.

ABSTRACT: *The present review is a critical reflection on Kenny's book What I believe. The autor tries to understand why Kenny is neither a theist nor an atheist, but an agnostic. He thinks that Kenny is not a theist because arguments for the existence of God always have for him logical weaknesses. According to the author, in this point appears Kenny's "central belief", namely that human logic makes reality to be true. Nevertheless, the author shows that Kenny is closer to the theist position, and that his conceptions of both the unity of the human being and of virtue are very similar to Christian moral teaching. The author also adds the comments on this review that Kenny has sent to him.*

KEYWORDS: *belief, God, Anthony Kenny, metaphysics.*