

## Ward's Review: Just the Facts

The first review of my book *Evolutionary Religion* (ER) has now appeared, at Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews (online). It is by Keith Ward. I'm happy to offer my thanks to Ward for the effort he put into his review, but, sadly, I cannot thank him for accurate reporting of what is in my book. That is because there are a number of errors and misleading statements in Ward's exposition of what I have written. Equally concerning – and also perplexing – is that some of my central moves receive no mention at all. You don't hear from Ward what I mean by 'evolutionary religion' (a form of religion appropriate to the very early stage of intelligent development we are presently in) and you aren't told of the novel solution to problems of faith and reason I take this idea to afford. Nor does Ward tell you about my strategy of recasting failed theistic arguments as new and successful arguments for an alternative, and skeptical, way of being religious, one I have proposed in order to begin the discussion of evolutionary religion.

But here I will focus on errors of commission rather than on errors of omission. My intention is simply to correct the record by listing the main such errors and identifying what, in the relevant contexts, I have actually said (all page references, apart from those appearing in my quotations from Ward, are to ER). Simple facts can rarely be appealed to in any immediately interesting way in critical philosophical discussion, but what any discussion in a review should be able to start with are the simple facts as to what the author did or didn't say. As it happens, some of Ward's critical discussion can be made relevant to what I have said and is, or might turn out to be, interesting and worthy of consideration, but I do not wish to develop a response to this part of Ward's review on the present occasion. Today, it's just the facts.

(1) Ward's first paragraph includes the following material: "In the first two chapters of this book, Schellenberg...argues that the far-future beliefs of whatever succeeds the human species are liable to reduce our own early and primitive beliefs to virtual irrelevance. This is true in science, and we should expect it to be true of religion, too."

Three thoughts in this passage are misleading, and one is mistaken. I remain open to the idea that *nothing*, in the processes of hominid evolution, will succeed the human species because our species will survive (pp. 18, 21-23), and maintain only that a number of propositions about the deep future are epistemically possible – by which I mean not justifiedly believed false (pp. 42-43) – instead of holding, as Ward's word 'liable' suggests, that they are probably true. Nor do I, as Ward almost says, base my evolutionary skepticism about religious beliefs on a similar skepticism about science.

Now for the mistake, which also concerns science. I do not, in the first two chapters, or anywhere else in the book, say that it is even epistemically possible, in my sense, that our own early scientific beliefs will all be reduced to virtual irrelevance. Indeed, I explicitly argue that my way of developing evolutionary skepticism allows us to see certain central results of the science humans have already done as epistemically safe (pp. 41, 49).

(2) In the second half of Ward's third paragraph, we read this: "[I]f, in a million years, evidence turned up that proved determinism, those future beings should not say, 'I am voluntarily going to postulate determinism now'. I think they should say: 'The evidence has become very strong that determinism is true. I feel compelled to accept it'. But on the evolutionary argument for

scepticism, they should not believe it. There would still be millions of years ahead of those future beings, and the same arguments would apply -- who knows what future evidence would change their view of things? Deep time makes scepticism total and inescapable.”

In fact, I have explicitly and clearly stated and defended the idea (p. 48) that “a different relation to time and a different history of intellectual effort and achievement than our own would yield a much weaker argument for evolutionary skepticism,” and so it is false to say, as Ward does here, that “on the evolutionary argument for skepticism, they should not believe it.” My emphasis throughout is on the thought of our very *early* place in time, which after another million years is not going to be a thought that applies.

(3) In his fourth paragraph Ward says: “Schellenberg has a belief...that there is a transcendent, non-material and supremely valuable, ultimate reality. His argument entails that we should certainly not believe that.”

It would be odd if this were true, given that I am a religious skeptic. In fact, as Ward himself later notes, because of our place in time I defend only having an imaginative and *non-believing* sort of faith in response to the stated proposition.

(4) In Ward’s paragraph 6, we find this: “And here is a problem for Schellenberg's view. If we do not know the future, how do we know that knowledge will improve and change considerably? There has been a remarkable revolution in knowledge in the last few centuries, but maybe that's it! What should we believe about the future?”

It is not part of my view that knowledge will improve and change considerably, let alone that we know this! Intellectual improvements, again, I regard as epistemically possible. And I myself have explicitly emphasized that “maybe that’s it” (pp. 17, 32), drawing our attention to the novel conclusions that can be drawn even if we concede this.

(5) Two paragraphs further on, these thoughts appear: “Schellenberg writes that there are degrees of feeling that a proposition is true, so that, for instance, the more attractive a proposition is, the greater reason you have for not feeling that it is true. Therefore a maximally attractive proposition is one for which you have the maximal reason for not thinking it is true. It is not just that you cannot decide. You really should feel strongly that it is not true. This seems rather worse than just not being able to decide on truth. It is accepting something and living your life in terms of something that there is good reason to think is untrue.”

Here Ward appears to have confused the notion that properties of beliefs such as attractiveness are degreed, which I do affirm (p. 50), with the idea that belief itself is degreed, which I do not affirm – remaining open in ER to many detailed alternative analyses of what it is to believe (p. 40). And I certainly have not said anything entailing that “a maximally attractive proposition is one for which you have the maximal reason for not thinking it is true.” Quite the contrary. I have proposed only that a high degree of attractiveness *together with high degrees of certain other properties* is sufficient for reasonably being *in doubt* about the truth of a proposition (p. 50).

(6) Shortly thereafter, we have this: “[T]here must be reasons for acting as-if, and Schellenberg

actually mentions some of them. Religious propositions, to be acceptable, must provide a plausible and comprehensive world view. There must be claimed 'experiences of an ultimate reality of ultimate value', which give some evidence of 'explicit interaction with transcendent Divine reality' (p. 78). Acceptance of religious propositions should increase 'maturity and insight' (p. 83). And there may be a feeling that one's present way of life is unsatisfactory and ignoble, and the lives of some religious believers (or 'accepters') might suggest more fulfilling possibilities. Such considerations might reasonably lead some people voluntarily to decide to adopt a religious belief, with its associated practices, in a sort of exploratory way, and see what happens."

In this passage Ward conflates acting-as-if, acceptance, and my own preferred alternative of imaginative faith. I have elsewhere distinguished the first two of these, and my own way of developing a conception of non-doxastic faith is clearly and explicitly distinguished from L. J. Cohen's acceptance in ER (p. 104). So it is a mistake for Ward to speak of my view in terms of such acceptance. Moreover I have nowhere said that religious propositions adopted in non-believing faith "must provide a plausible and comprehensive worldview." Epistemic possibility, I have said, is enough, and at our early stage of development we should avoid the details suggested by 'comprehensive.' Furthermore, the first of Ward's quotations from me in this paragraph does not appear on p. 78; in the third my order is reversed; and the context for all of these quotations is misdescribed: I am not here giving reasons for non-doxastic religious faith as Ward says. Nor, in this context, can it be other than misleading to speak of adopting a religious *belief*: one adopts a religious *proposition* in imaginative *nonbelieving* faith.

(7) Approaching the end of the review, one reads this: "In the fourth and final pair of chapters, Schellenberg sets out to answer objections to his final view, which he calls 'ultimism' rather than theism. Ultimism pictures 'the ultimate reality [as] ultimately valuable and the source of an ultimate good in which we can participate', which participation can probably only happen for many after death (p. 155). I have to say this sounds like theism to me, especially since he espouses Anselm's formula for the ultimate, 'that than which no greater can be conceived'."

In fact, it is only in the first of these last two chapters that I answer objections; in the second I develop the novel positive approach mentioned in my first paragraph above, which Ward neglects to mention. And my final view is not ultimism, but that adopting ultimism in imaginative faith can be justified rationally even if theistic belief cannot. Moreover, although I quote Anselm (in words different from those used by Ward), I also give explicit attention to just how Anselm's general formula does *not* entail the idea of a person-like God (p. 140) – which is what 'theism' is taken to denote throughout ER.

(8) Finally, we have this: "I suspect that anyone who postulates that there is a supremely valuable source of universal and ultimate good will expect to find some specific instances of human contact with, and transformation by, this good. A search for revelation will begin, and you might expect to find that while such instances do not disclose all the truths there are to be known about the ultimate, nevertheless they provide accurate information which is not seriously misleading about the nature and goals of human existence.... *Thus I think what Schellenberg is really saying* is that religious believers should be much less dogmatic, especially about very detailed and

obscure and controversial beliefs. They should be much more open to new possibilities of relating to an ultimately valuable transcendent reality. And they should not insist on precise ancient formulations and rules, but should be ready to re-think what makes for human well-being and human maturity (my emphasis).”

This passage appears to reflect a tendency one finds throughout the review: much concern with what Schellenberg might or should have said, especially on the one topic of justified religious belief, and rather less with what he actually did say. Ward may here be seeking to do me the kindness of making me sound more reasonable and less radical. But the central thrust of ER *is precisely* that the consequences of deep time for religion are radical. And the simple kindness, when it comes to exposition, of a worthwhile review (one I suspect Ward himself would look for in reviews of his work) is the attempt to allow the author’s own voice to be heard.