

The Enlightenment That Won't Go Away: Modernity's Crux

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Abstract.

The Critical Process unleashed by the Enlightenment and endlessly resharpening itself to this day has mortally wounded the God of Deism, maybe also of theism, even of Christianity. A temptation of Christian theology is to retreat in denial into an updated version of Deism, seemingly granting full license to modern science but only so long as it does not impugn God's love. The alternative here proposed is to ride out The Critical Process, in fact to encourage it, all the way into modernity's crux: How can a design that is not benign still be divine? The Christian reply is: through a real death of God and of ourselves as well, and through resurrections beginning now, thus freeing The Critical Process from the illusion of insuring our survival and, instead, for the honest Enlightenment task of merely telling the truth.

Keywords: Christian theology; The Critical Process; critical reason; crux; Charles Darwin; Deism; Enlightenment; evil; David Hume; postmodernism; rationalism; science; survival; yoke.

Editor Philip Hefner has asked that I respond informally to

Zygon's March 2000 "Discussion: Rethinking Christian Theology in Light of Science." The discussion opened with two set pieces on that subject by Arthur Peacocke and David Pailin, followed by a critique from Vitor Westhelle, all three of them variously (though enviably) knowledgeable in science and theology. The discussion as a whole was introduced by a canny, provocative lead-in written by the editor himself, which simply must be included in my response. In fact I have had trouble, as the reader will see, getting beyond the thesis Hefner advances in his introduction and hence reading the three essays in any other light than the one in which Hefner casts them. They deserve much more. But each of the three in its own way bears Hefner out, though they may not all want to.

Hefner entitled his introduction "The Enlightenment Won't Go Away (Hefner 2000). Because it won't, at least just yet, I am thankful. Westhelle may be, too, if he can agree that his thoughtful brand of postmodernism is really more "modern" than "post," hence more Enlightenment, at least in one fundamental respect. In that same fundamental respect, however, Peacocke and Pailin strike me as deeply ambivalent about the Enlightenment. For its ongoing, withering critique—most recently now in postmodernism but long before that—devastates not only the sort of religion they themselves reproach but, if I am right, their own religion as well. Pailin posits and Peacocke seconds "that the basic structure of reality. . . [encourages] people to feel at home in it because it is a basically purposive process that. . . respects human values," and all because of theism's God (Pailin 2000, 149, quoted in Peacocke 2000, 132). Yet isn't it exactly this uncritically optimistic theism that is refuted by the scientific rationality that Peacocke and Pailin, out of the other side of their argument, wish to champion? They can have it both ways, it seems to me, only by hoping the Enlightenment will go away.

Granted, that is not how they understand themselves. Pailin spurns theological notions that are “pre-Enlightenment” (p. 146), and Peacocke sees himself as “one for whom the inheritance of the Enlightenment is ... irreversible in its effects on theology” (p. 121). So I may have them wrong. However, the suspicion continues to haunt. The theology that both Peacocke and Pailin appear to want is not so much Christian theology, the subject assigned for this “Discussion,” as it is a somewhat Christianized version of “natural theology” (Pailin’s own word for it) with distinct debts to the old deistic tradition of a religion of “reason.” That inheritance, of course, comes “naturally” to English Christians like our two essayists. That *early* strand of the Enlightenment, namely deistic rationalism, they loyally uphold.

Then what is it about the Enlightenment that they seem to wish would go away, if they do at all? I am thinking merely of eighteenth-century critics of rationalism, David Hume for example. Pailin, far more than Peacocke, acknowledges the embarrassment posed by that criticism, though I don’t find Pailin incorporating it into his own proposal. Peacocke would not have had to wait until twentieth-century “neo-orthodoxy” for its irksome strictures on natural theology. He has far more telling (and far more rational) strictures to complain about right on his own island, two centuries before. Notice, I am assuming that Humean skepticism, opposed though it is to an earlier stage of Enlightenment thought, is itself one further stage in that same continuing Enlightenment. So, I contend, is postmodernism, its own claims to the contrary notwithstanding. In any case, this historical assumption figures materially in my agreement with Hefner that “the Enlightenment won’t go away,” at least in one fundamental respect. For that reason, *Deo gratias*.

What we mean by “the Enlightenment,” of course, is subject to definition. Still, it is not a wax nose. Though it is hardly one

thing, it is this and not that. There is something about the Enlightenment that through all its subsequent self-corrections demonstrably perdures. It is in light of that larger something, not only "in light of science," that Christian theology needs to be rethought, "enlightened." Science, too, might further profit from the same enlightenment. Certainly both of them together could, science-*and*-theology. And what is it about the Enlightenment that won't go away? Answer: its very criticalness. It is that historic vocation that free peoples have inherited from the Enlightenment (not to mention the Reformation, and before) to be unsparingly critical, sparing not even themselves in the process. But hasn't Enlightenment critique been particularly hard on traditional religion, also Christian theology? Yes, particularly. Yet Christian theology can also, I hope, weather and welcome that criticism and, as in this small essay, do its bit to promote it. That requires neither masochism nor a theological game of chicken ("more self-critical than thou"), just a rationale for survival, outliving the very mortifying process we simultaneously employ.

May I call that The Critical Process? It works through, but is not limited to, our own critical reason. Indeed, such reasoning itself comes under criticism from itself. It implodes in self-contradiction, precisely when it is most critical. For that reason I am stretching toward a more inclusive term, The Critical Process, so as not to restrict this phenomenon prematurely. It is a process not only in which we engage but which engages us, even consumes us. Today's critics are tomorrow's criticized, each new critical wave engulfing the one before, but the movement as such seems to sustain a momentum of its own. Then, is the process an infinite regress? I do know there have been historic moments—moments of great daring, perhaps, or despair?—when the most critical reasoners (Hume, for example, or Theodor Adorno or Elie Wiesel) have tried to bring

this whole infinite regress to heel. They have forced a showdown by bringing under The Critical Process the very Source of that process, demanding a reckoning from . . . whom? The ultimate Critic? God? The prophets and Jesus showed similar chutzpah. Most of us, I suppose, shrink from such hazardous consistency, what religious people call blasphemy or atheism. Instead, we prefer the safety of compromise and denial, slackening The Critical Process while we are still (presumably) ahead. Both kinds of critics, the consistent and the inconsistent, and many subkinds in between, now float in the wake of The Critical Process unleashed by the Enlightenment. It is a process we cannot live without, we moderns, anymore than we can live with it.

Consider an example, the critical science and theology of Victorian England. In Hefner's aforementioned introduction he cites A. N. Wilson's recent book, *God's Funeral*. The book is a devastating but not unsympathetic recounting of Wilson's English ancestors in the nineteenth century who did what they had to do, get rid of God. It is not that Wilson cannot understand their plight. After all, the God whom they had inherited, hence the God whom they denied, was little more than the God of the Deists, not the Christians' God with whom Wilson identifies. So he construes the Victorian deicides as good riddance. For that very reason, however, Wilson finds it no wonder that these new atheists, having freed themselves from what they thought was God, should then still pine for some Godlike replacement, at least a moral and aesthetic equivalent. The only God they had succeeded in killing was a figment to begin with. It was a construct which Deists had concocted in hopes of salvaging a religion of reason to satisfy Enlightenment criteria. It did not satisfy the Victorians who followed, who (as I read the history) out-enlightened the Enlightenment Deists by finishing God off—this deistic God—not realizing how they, too, were still

undershooting the real thing. That is why they themselves were not satisfied, not religiously. As Hefner concludes, "The Enlightenment won't go away, and the same can be said of traditional religion" (2000, 117). Mightn't it be that on one point at least the Enlightenment and "traditional religion" are joined by a common "yoke" (Greek: *zygon*), namely, The Critical Process?

What I would underscore, more than Wilson himself might, is that these nineteenth-century critics who overthrew the God of their age were not only opposing the Enlightenment, as they believed they were. They were also, willy-nilly, advancing it. True, they attacked the Enlightenment in its earlier form as Deism. But the Enlightenment as The Critical Process they vigorously perpetuated, of course in new ways but every bit as aggressively as the first wave of Enlightenment critics had. Indeed, it was not until the Victorians rediscovered him that Hume, from the previous century, finally came into his own as the unmasker of Deism. (Wilson calls him a "time bomb.") In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), in the person of Philo, Hume had cited Epicurus's classic trilemma on the problem of evil. The implication should have been clear then already though Hume's deist contemporaries may not have been ready for it: If God is able and willing to prevent evil but does not, why call him God? That option, atheism, was Epicurus's own preference. Was it Hume's? Probably not. Certainly the Victorians'. Therewith they finally did in the God of the Deists, Paley's Watchmaker, the absentee landlord whom Deists imagined they had kept sufficiently aloof from the messiness and pitilessness of "what is" so as to salvage God's reputation as God. Charles Darwin, though not without personal struggles of his own, administered the final blow. "What is" could now be explained by natural selection, without recourse to the hypothesis of a Designer.

On further thought, was it only the God of the Deists who succumbed? Mightn't it have been the God of Wilson's own "theism" as well? (In fairness, Wilson does seem to allow for that.) Evidently Darwin thought so, or, if he wavered, many of his followers surely think so. In any event, the question is a fair one still today: Isn't the God of Christian theology, which Zygon rightly asks us to "rethink," likewise implicated in the Victorians' attack? After all, the problem of evil, which is really a euphemism for the problem of God, is no less embarrassing for today's theists, let alone Christians, than it was a century ago. Our answer to that question about God, now as ever, really depends on how far we are prepared to ride out The Critical Process—all the way to the death of God, our God, not just the Deists' God?

Even we, for all our differences from the Deists, still have a stake, as they did, in God as Creator. Yes, more than they did, with our Creator being so much more immanent than theirs. And for that conviction we have not only faith but good reason. For is it really so far fetched, isn't it in fact altogether reasonable, critically reasonable, to infer that there is plenty of "design" in the world about us, especially if we are already persuaded on other than scientific grounds? At least for the previously convinced, always glad for corroboration of their faith, design is massively evident whether or not they need to invoke it to solve their technological or bench-science problems. But then might not Pailin and Peacocke be right after all about reality as "basically purposive" and respectful of "human values"?

The trouble is that what is equally reasonable is the opposite: whatever design there is is hardly universally benign. Science itself will not let us forget that. The very IBE (inference to the best explanation) that Peacocke urges upon us, rightly so, infers to the diametric opposite of his own counterfactual

optimism. So here we have two lines of reasoning, both compelling, coming into collision with each other. (Pailin seems to sense that better than Peacocke does.) That is what I meant earlier by saying critical reason implodes upon itself and does so precisely by being most reasonable. It is reasonable to expect that in, with, and under all this awesome complexity is the Creator we believe in, and that any such Creator is both able and willing to prevent evil. Alas, it is just as reasonable to observe that this Creator conspicuously does not prevent evil or, worse, sometimes does and sometimes does not. That sort of selectiveness—call it favoritism—makes Epicurus's taunt all too understandable: Then why call that God? In short, if the design is not benign, can it be divine?

Martin Luther acknowledged the problem exactly as a God problem—and sweated it. Erasmus shifted the problem to humanity, positing just enough free will in us to make us the guilty ones. (Luther asked him why he “accused” human beings in order to “excuse” God.) Calvin defended God's partiality, both ways. Darwin, let it be said to his credit, did not blink the old question, Why some and not others? Remember how *On The Origin of Species* is subtitled, *The Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*. But he evades the scandal of blaming the favoritism on God, in this respect still like the Deists, by attributing it instead to the selectiveness of “Nature.” Theologically, that is arbitrary. It would have been at least as truthful to admit that this scandalous “design” seems intentional and that its Intender thereby frustrates human rationality at its most honest, moral best.

Wasn't it William James who in protest exclaimed, “Damned if I'll call that God”? So that's why. “The Absolute” of the idealists struck James as one who is able and willing to prevent evil but does not, therewith demanding our rejection. But on pain of damnation? James was capable of feeling damned, also of

saying so. Then perhaps *that* is why, when faced with a nonbenign design, we reject this self-implosion of reason: to avoid blaming God, yes, but only so as to avoid our own “damnation” or, in secular terms, the death of our rational selves. But at all costs, even the truth? We have been known to abdicate even the truth in order to salvage what we can of ourselves. Might not that have been the stronger impulse behind Deism, not only Darwinism, stronger even than the impulse toward theodicy, namely, the all-out human drive to survive? In the *Zygon* “Discussion” before us, Peacocke unabashedly stakes his case for the trust-worthiness of our “cognitive processes” on how they have insured our “survival,” for him a big word—so big, he senses it may subject him to the postmodernists’ charge of “foundationalism” (2000, 125- 26). Also, he makes no effort to conceal his own debt to prestigious Deists who, with Erasmus before them, tailored their notion of reason to what was humanly advantageous (p. 121). And why not? Well, for one reason, as Peacocke to his credit concedes, “The *extent*” to which evolutionary biology insures the survival benefits of human rationality “is still an open, indeed confused question” (p. 126; emphasis added). To say the least. That admission, though still too modest, sounds more like the persistent Enlightenment conscience that I have been calling The Critical Process. Precisely by its rational doggedness it not merely insures but eventually incriminates our survival, and not just biologically.

This mortifying collision of critical reason with itself, this theological crux of modernity which the sciences are good at abetting, may just be the ultimate example of what Westhelle (2000,169-70) calls humanity’s “limit” situations. Still, taken by itself, that is not yet Christian theology. But it may be a radicalized natural theology, which Christian theology can help parlay into the common good. That won’t be easy, if only because of the resistance my proposal will encounter right within the

theological establishment. For this proposal, too, is one of those “subjugated knowledges” that, in Michel Foucault’s apt phrase, cries out for “insurrection.” More imaginative Christians will plump for insurrection via resurrection. I mean resurrection in the here and now. Of course, that also presupposes dying here and now, though now an enlightened dying. For the crux is played out in a real death of God, who for now might better go unnamed. (Perhaps to heighten suspense? To observe the church’s “Discipline of The Secret”?) Meanwhile, we might at least drop a hint. He was the one who claimed that his “yoke,” or *zygon* (pronounced *dzuGON*, rhymes with “begone”) is altogether reasonable, or, as he put it, “easy” (Matthew 11:30). I take this to mean that, because the burden has shifted to his side, The Critical Process (including critical reason) is liberated from the illusion of insuring our survival and is freed instead to do its own thing, tell the truth. That way the Enlightenment not only won’t go away, it could just come into its own.

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