The futility of our minds

GR McLean

If we are the sorts of people who pride ourselves upon our fashionably up-to-date intellectual sophistication, upon our enlightened, free-thinking, liberated beliefs and attitudes, then there is much in the correspondence of the Apostle Paul that we will find objectionable. Here is one passage which, if we deigned to consider it at all, we would regard as particularly offensive:

... you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart ...

The Gentiles of whom Paul speaks were members of the most advanced civilisation that the world had ever seen. Graeco-Roman achievements in philosophy, in the arts and in the sciences were the most impressive of the ancient world. This civilisation's military prowess, its astonishing feats of engineering and the efficiency of its public administration had enabled it to impose an order of relative peace across a vast region of the known world. It was undogmatically broad-minded and tolerant enough to accommodate a wide diversity of religious beliefs and particular moral practices. It took pride in contrasting its own enlightened outlook with the barbarism of the tribes beyond its imperial outposts. It was, in short, a civilisation very much

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like our own. And it is this civilisation’s members to whom Paul refers when he talks of the ‘futility of their minds’.

What can he possibly mean? It cannot be a mere anti-intellectual rant. Even leaving aside the fact that the Apostle cannot disguise his own prodigious learning and intellectual ability, nobody who believes that the greatest commandment requires us to love God with \textit{all our mind} can take a dismissive attitude to the intellect \textit{as such}. Indeed, a few sentences later (as elsewhere), he talks of a \textit{renewed mind} as a key to the kind of life he is urging upon his readers.\footnote{2} So what is his point?

A futile mind is presumably an ineffectual or useless mind, a mind failing to achieve its proper purpose: the grasp and application of truth, the acquisition and employment of knowledge, of wisdom, of understanding. And that is how Paul enlarges upon his remark. The Gentiles, he says, are darkened in their understanding. Despite their intellectual achievements in so many lesser theoretical and practical spheres, there is within them an ignorance of the most important truths of all: those truths concerning the life of God. And, perhaps most strikingly, the Apostle says that the root cause of this ignorance is their ‘hardness of heart’.

There are, no doubt, various aspects to what Paul is saying and various directions in which it could be explored. But in one direction there is, it seems to me, a clear connection with matters I have raised in an earlier article, ‘The imagination of our hearts’\footnote{3}. There I considered Pascal’s famous reference to the \textit{reasons of the heart}. Pascal claims that there can be very different inclinations at work within the heart: there can be the love of God but there can also be the love of oneself. And the heart can establish its own chosen allegiance – either in the love of God and a hardening of itself against self-love or in the love of oneself and a hardening of itself against God. These inclinations of the heart influence the ways in which we employ and direct our reasonings and so they can influence the \textit{beliefs} we come to hold. Hence Pascal calls them \textit{reasons} of the heart. But he says that these are reasons of which reason itself may know nothing – and part of what he means by this, I think, is that these inclinations can exert their influence upon our beliefs in ways that are hidden from our own view.

As evidence of the anti-God inclination to which Pascal refers, I reported the contemporary philosopher Thomas Nagel’s observation of a widespread ‘fear of religion’:
In speaking of the fear of religion, I don't mean to refer to the entirely reasonable hostility toward certain established religions and religious institutions, in virtue of their objectionable moral doctrines, social policies, and political influence. Nor am I referring to the association of many religious beliefs with superstition and the acceptance of evident empirical falsehoods. I am talking about something much deeper – namely, the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.  

This widely shared attitude, Nagel believes, ‘has large and often pernicious consequences for modern intellectual life’. He guesses that it ‘is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism of our time’ and, in particular, that it supports ‘the ludicrous overuse of evolutionary biology to explain everything about life, including everything about the human mind’. And he points out that this is ‘a somewhat ridiculous situation’ for ‘it is just as irrational to be influenced in one’s beliefs by the hope that God does not exist as by the hope that God does exist.’

We may be surprised by the remarkable candour of Nagel’s testimony but few of us – certainly few of us in the academic world – will be surprised by his suggestions about the incidence of this anti-God attitude. And what Nagel is suggesting is that in the contemporary intellectual world there is, because of this attitude, a good deal of what philosophers call motivated irrationality. That is, the anti-God inclination is moving people to engage in irrational intellectual activity. This would be an instance of the very thing that Pascal refers to: a heartfelt aversion towards the possibility that God exists, an aversion of which reason may not be conscious, is irrationally influencing our use of reason – governing the direction in which our enquiries are permitted to travel and the conclusions which they are permitted to draw.

But how can this happen? We are all aware that our prejudices and wishes can affect what we believe but how can they do so? Our wanting
something to be the case is one thing; our believing that it is the case is quite another. How can the one influence the other?

I may badly want it to be a fine day. But if I am standing outside in drenching rain and an icy wind, with my wits and senses in proper working order, then I simply can't believe that it's a fine day. The want can't bring about the belief. You might greatly increase the intensity of my want by offering to pay me a large sum of money if I succeed in believing that it's a fine day. But that still won't do the trick. However badly I want it to be the case, or want to believe that it is the case, I can't really believe that it is the case. For in believing something, I believe that it's true. And as I'm well aware, the truth or otherwise of this matter is entirely independent of what I happen to desire. For me to believe that it is true, it must seem to me that in forming my belief I am actually responding satisfactorily to the indications of what is true – not to my desires. So unless it seems to me to be true, I cannot believe it, however strongly I may desire it to be true and however strongly I may desire to believe it. How, then, can there be situations in which our desires do influence our beliefs?

We begin to see something of the solution to this puzzle when we consider the kinds of beliefs that require more in the way of judgement than my belief about the state of the weather requires. That belief – that it's a foul day – occurs (when I am standing out in the weather) quite immediately and spontaneously. I don't need to deliberate or do any serious thinking. The evidence is, as we say, compelling. It is unavoidably, forcefully apparent – and my belief is similarly unavoidable. But not all beliefs are like that. On many matters I can form a belief only as a result of some process of judgement. I may be more or less conscious of this process but it will be a process over which I have some control. It will be up to me whether and how to direct my enquiry, how to interpret evidence and so on. And in fact I will have wide scope to pursue this process in a number of different ways – though many of those ways will go in irrational directions. One of my favourite examples of this is provided by an entry in Stephen Pile's humorous collection The Book of Heroic Failures. It is an entry with the title ‘The Worst Tourist'; apparently it is a true story:

The least successful tourist on record is Mr Nicholas Scotti of San Francisco. In 1977 he flew from America to his native Italy to visit relatives.
En route the plane made a one-hour fuel stop at Kennedy Airport. Thinking that he had arrived, Mr Scotti got out and spent two days in New York believing that he was in Rome.

When his nephews were not there to meet him, Mr Scotti assumed they had been delayed in the heavy Roman traffic mentioned in their letters. While tracking down their address, the great traveller could not help noticing that modernisation had brushed aside most, if not all, of the ancient city’s landmarks.

He also noticed that many people spoke English with a distinct American accent. However, he just assumed that Americans got everywhere. Furthermore, he assumed it was for their benefit that so many street signs were written in English.

Mr Scotti spoke very little English himself and next asked a policeman (in Italian) the way to the bus depot. As chance would have it, the policeman came from Naples and replied fluently in the same tongue.

After twelve hours travelling round on a bus, the driver handed him over to a second policeman. There followed a brief argument in which Mr Scotti expressed amazement at the Rome police force employing someone who did not speak his own language.

Scotti’s brilliance is seen in the fact that even when told he was in New York, he refused to believe it.

To get him on a plane back to San Francisco he was raced to the airport in a police car with sirens screaming. ‘See’, said Scotti to his interpreter, ‘I know I’m in Italy. That’s how they drive.’

One can’t help thinking that poor Mr Scotti seems not to have been endowed with especially acute mental powers. But his problem is not mere weakness of intellect. He displays a certain obstinacy. He refuses to believe that he is not in Rome. His attachment to his fixed idea is wilful. Exercising his will, he magnifies the extremely slender indications that he could be in Rome (the Neapolitan policeman and the way the police are driving). And he actively dismisses the tidal wave of evidence that he is not in Rome. He ignores that
evidence or explains it away with the assistance of auxiliary assumptions that can reconcile it to his fixed belief. However irrational, these are all judgements that he is able to make.

Now where our will is involved, it can be influenced by what we desire and so our desires can get into the act. Suppose that I wish to believe something but unfortunately for me my belief is false. Moved by my desire, I can choose not to raise any question about what I believe; I can choose not to attend to relevant evidence; I can choose to avoid evidence or ignore it or downplay it or magnify it by focussing selectively upon it. In all these ways my desire can irrationally govern what I believe.

And of course those are ways with which we are all familiar, though we recognise them more readily in other people than in ourselves. We are aware of wishful thinking. We know what it is for someone to be in denial, as we put it. We can detect how someone’s desires bias his judgement. We can be in a position to observe that someone is deceiving himself.

Our desires can influence our idle opinions. Our wish to believe that our national sporting hero is not a cheat may lead us to dismiss the indications that he has been taking drugs. Our ill-will towards the sporting hero of an opposing national team may move us to be particularly receptive to the notion that he has been taking drugs. But our desires can also motivate our beliefs on matters of great public moment or of intense personal significance. Our wish to believe that there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq may lead us to attach too much significance to some bits of evidence and too little to others. Our desire to believe that we can carry on enjoying undisturbed peace may move us to believe that Hitler can’t really be motivated by unbridled aggression and this in turn may move us to attach far too much significance to his protestations and far too little to his actions and the evidence on the ground. Gripped by an intense wish not to have cancer, I may ignore the symptoms and avoid the tests until it is too late for my life to be saved.

There is no guarantee that such a desire will influence belief irrationally. The way I form my judgement is up to me so it is possible, at least in principle, for the believer to exercise rational self-control in the teeth of opposing desire. It may even be the case that, precisely because he is aware that he harbours the desire, he takes particularly scrupulous care to avoid its influence and form his judgement rationally. And even where the desire does motivate belief, there is no guarantee that it will bend belief away
from the truth. The foreign sporting hero might indeed be cheating and our hostility towards him has produced a correct belief. Or, rather more nobly, our loyal wish to believe the best of those we love might move us to disregard accusations made against them and our loyalty turns out to be vindicated when the accusations are proved false.

But whenever our belief is formed irrationally, it can be true only by a fluke. And because there is no reliable connection between irrational processes and truth and because there are many more ways for a belief to be false than for it to be true, most irrationally formed beliefs will fail to be true. Hence any belief that is irrationally motivated by one’s desire is more likely to be false than true.

All the same, though we have now identified the processes through which desire motivates belief, we have not yet said enough to solve our earlier puzzle. I can’t believe something unless it seems to me that it is true. But what is true is independent of what I desire. (The truth about whether I actually have cancer or what Hitler actually intends is independent of what I desire about these matters.) And of course I understand this independence of truth and desire. So I understand that what I desire need be no indication of the truth. But then, if I am aware that my desire is governing what I am doing, how can this process issue in a belief? How can the process make it seem to me that I have got hold of the truth?

The answer to this question is that I can’t be aware that my desire is governing the process. If the process is to issue in belief, then it must seem to me that it has led me to the truth. And this can be the case only if I am unconscious or at most only partly conscious of the influence of the desire. And because I am the person in charge of the process, this means that, in many cases, I must to some extent hide from my own awareness the influence of the desire. Its motivating work must be allowed to go on ‘behind my back’, not in ‘the full glare of self-consciousness’, as Jon Elster helpfully puts it.11 Hence in these cases there will be an element of self-deception in the process. Whenever my belief is irrationally motivated by a desire, I must, to whatever extent is required, suppress from my consciousness the fact that desire is doing the work and allow myself to believe that I am responding properly to truth. (There are further interesting philosophical puzzles about how self-deception is possible: how is it that I can hide something from myself? But that we do manage to do this, at least in effect, is not in dispute.)
And its seeming to me that the process does lead me to the truth can be reinforced in various ways. The company I keep, the actions I take and the environment I inhabit can all play their part. Suppose, once again, that I wish not to believe something – something that is, as it happens, true. Then I can avoid or ignore or respond to evidence in the ways already described. But it will help if I can find a support network of like-minded people. My desire will naturally move me to seek the company of such people and we can together provide a reinforced environment in which the question we do not wish to ask is not permitted to arise or if it does arise it can be dealt with in the desired way. It will also help if we perform actions that we could not consistently perform if in fact we did believe what we wish not to believe. For as the psychologists have shown us, cognitive dissonance is produced when we perform actions that are inconsistent with what we believe and cognitive dissonance is a state which we feel the need to remove or at least reduce. Unless we can find a way of reconciling our actions with our belief, we can remove the dissonance only either by changing our actions or by getting rid of the belief. But if we are resolved to persist in our actions then the first of those options is closed. So our commitment to actions that are consistent only with our disbelief will certainly tend to reinforce that disbelief. Performing such actions as a matter of habit will tend to prevent any genuinely rational consideration of the possibility that what we do not wish to believe is in fact true. Thus these various elements – the company of like-minded disbelievers, habitual activity and the general environment these produce – can all make their contribution to what we might call a culture of disbelief. My desire not to believe will itself gravitate me towards such a culture and as I immerse myself in this culture my irrationally-motivated disbelief will tend to feel entirely natural. This culture provides the environment in which I can feel fully confident in my disbelief – the environment in which what I do not wish to believe seems, in fact, to possess minimal plausibility.

Thus we have a picture of how the anti-God desire could motivate irrational disbelief in God. This desire could move us to ignore or avoid evidence of God’s existence, to find irrational means to explain such evidence away, to concentrate selectively upon what seems to be evidence of God’s non-existence and so on. It could prompt us to ensure that the question of God’s existence is never raised and to spend our time busily constructing theories that simply take the non-existence of God for granted and explain
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the world in purely naturalistic terms – which is exactly what Nagel accuses
the contemporary intellectual world of doing, with what he says are ‘perni-
cious’ and ‘ludicrous’ results.

And this picture is enough to alert us to the dangers of the anti-God
desire. All the same, I have not yet said anything to suggest that those dangers
are special. For any desire might exert an irrational influence upon belief in
those kinds of ways. In particular, we have not seen that the anti-God desire
is any more liable to move someone to irrational disbelief in God than is the
opposite desire to move someone to irrational belief in God. For of course
there is an old accusation that people believe in God not because of evidence
of God’s existence but because they want it to be true that God exists; their
belief is a kind of wishful thinking. This accusation could be spelled out by
reference to the very processes of motivated irrationality that I have been
describing. Those are the processes – it could be said – through which belief
in God is irrationally maintained. It seems to me very important to note
that this old accusation could rebound in the opposite direction. We have
an unbalanced perspective until we recognise that the irrational influence
could work in either direction. But still, this doesn’t show that there is any
peculiar danger attached to the anti-God attitude.

But I think that rather more can be said. For it seems to me that the
anti-God desire does possess a particular propensity to influence irrational
belief on the question of God’s existence – in two respects.12

In order to see the first respect in which the anti-God desire is par-
ticularly prone to influence irrational disbelief, it will be helpful to return to
the example of my uncomfortable belief about the weather. Standing out in
the wind and rain, freezing and wet, I can’t help believing that the weather
is foul however much I want it to be true that it’s a fine day. The evidence
is unavoidable and it compels my belief. I can be very strongly motivated to
believe that it’s a fine day but the irrational processes I might be moved to
pursue would be overwhelmed by the evidence to the contrary. In the face
of the evidence, the irrational forces would be vanquished. I would stand a
better chance of believing what I want to believe if I were to remain inside,
however, keeping the curtains closed while watching video recordings
of happy holidays on the Sunshine Coast. If I don’t want to know, I don’t
need to look. I can at least remain agnostic about the state of the weather
by avoiding the evidence. And while warm and dry inside I might manage
even to remain in denial about the weather, persisting in the belief that the
weather is not lousy. Under these circumstances my desire that it be a fine day would have much more room to exert an irrational influence.

So the power of a desire to motivate irrational belief will depend (among other things) upon the extent to which contrary evidence can be avoided. Where sufficient contrary evidence is unavoidable and unable to be misinterpreted, the desire will have little room for manoeuvre. But where contrary evidence can be avoided, or where it can be more readily misinterpreted, the desire will have plenty of scope to influence belief by irrational processes. So then, what scope of this kind does the anti-God desire enjoy? Is evidence of God’s existence unavoidable and overwhelming, or otherwise?

We only need to ask this question to answer it. Plenty of people do manage to avoid believing in God so they have not been compelled to believe in God by unavoidable and overwhelming evidence. Their experience, in this respect, has been unlike my experience when I am standing out in the rotten weather.

In raising this question we come up against a topic which is very much alive in contemporary philosophy of religion, the topic often referred to as the question of divine hiddenness. Some philosophers have used the phenomenon we are here considering as the basis for an argument against the existence of God. If God did exist, they argue, then he would ensure that we have clear and decisive evidence of his existence; but there is no such conclusive evidence of his existence; and therefore he does not exist. And other philosophers have sought to rebut this atheistic argument by showing that God would have good reason not to provide that kind of evidence of his existence. Such responses to the atheistic argument might sound like special pleading were it not for the fact that this topic has been discussed over thousands of years by the biblical authors and by theologians and Christian philosophers, including particularly Pascal, who have reflected upon how it can be that God does not impose upon us a compelling awareness of his presence – and who have sought to account for this in ways that have principled, coherent connections with the rest of what they believe.

So for instance, a number of philosophers have argued that an unavoidable awareness of God’s presence would seriously restrict our freedom. Overwhelming evidence can coerce belief but it can also coerce action. (Consider how the visible presence of a policeman watching our every move exercises a kind of coercive power over the choices we make. Consider, furthermore, the coercive power that would be exerted if we were continuously
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unable to avoid the overwhelming knowledge that this was a morally perfect policeman, who possessed irresistible power and who was aware not only of everything we do but also of every thought that we entertain.) If we are to be genuinely responsible for the ordinary detail and direction of our own lives and of the lives of others for whom we could care, we need to be able genuinely to choose those details and so we need to possess the kind of freedom required for that kind of choice. Or again, if it is to be possible for us genuinely to love God, then our response to God must not be coerced but must require our willing engagement, our willing submission to his love. A submission that is not willing is not a loving submission. But a submission is willing only if it can be withheld. God might shield us from unavoidable and overwhelming evidence of his presence, then, because such evidence would effectively coerce our choices in these matters and thereby remove the possibility of genuine responsibility for our own lives and the possibility of a loving relationship with him.

Or again, perhaps it is the case that conclusive evidence of God’s existence is withheld from us unless we seek that evidence in what I might call the appropriate spirit. For the possibility that God exists is not one to which we can rationally maintain a neutral attitude: it entails enormous personal consequences for each of us. If God does in fact exist then I am rightly subject to an all-powerful and morally perfect authority; my life cannot flourish except as every part of it is submitted gratefully to this authority’s just and loving purposes; and so on. Hence my enquiry concerning God’s existence is not genuinely open to the possibility that he exists unless I am open to the possibility of being challenged by, and required to submit to, such an authority. And if I am not open to this possibility, then my enquiry is not, as we might say, properly serious; it is not conducted in the spirit appropriate to the nature of that particular enquiry. And perhaps it is the case that if our enquiry is not conducted appropriately, then we are not entitled to expect it to issue in the evidence that could emerge from a properly conducted enquiry.

Much more could be said on this important topic which deserves its own discussion. But those are some of the reasons which have been, or might be, offered to account for the fact that the evidence of God’s existence is, for many of us, less than overwhelming. If we are to know of God’s presence then of course the evidence of his existence must not be unavailable. But
nor, if those reasons are correct, can that evidence be *unavoidable*. Those are reasons why we may need to seek in order to find.

In any case, the atheists and Christians can agree that the evidence of God’s existence is not unavoidable and overwhelming (and the Christians offer reasons why this is so). And if they are both right about this, as surely seems correct, then it follows that if God *does* exist then there *is* good reason why he *allows* the evidence of his existence to be avoidable. So if God *does* exist then the evidence of his existence *can be avoided*. And this entails that the anti-God desire has scope to influence belief in irrational directions.

If the evidence of God’s existence is avoidable then I can *choose* to avoid it. And by contrast, in order to *grasp* the evidence properly, I may need to *choose* to seek it. I may need to make some effort, to look for and find the evidence, as well as to attend to it properly, to take care to see it as it deserves to be seen, to interpret it and weigh it with good, balanced judgement; and all of this may require the further demanding moral effort needed if I am to be properly open to the possibility that God exists, given the momentous personal implications for me if that turns out to be true. This series of choices, this kind of care and effort, is what a *rational* enquiry would require. But at every point in this series the anti-God desire can interfere, moving those choices in irrational directions.

The kind of effort required for a rational enquiry concerning the existence of God – the effort required to seek, in proper submission to the truth – is precisely the kind of effort that the anti-God desire will move us *not* to make. But this means that the person who harbours the anti-God desire will be inclined to place himself in a position where he is *unable* to appreciate the *proper* evidence of God for he will be inclined not to make the effort *required* to disclose that evidence. In other words, the anti-God desire will incline him to place himself in a position where he is unable to form a *rational* view concerning the existence of God. If God *does* exist, and our efforts *are* governed by our anti-God desire, then our inability to draw a rational conclusion concerning God’s existence is *guaranteed*.

In order to introduce the second respect in which the anti-God desire is especially prone to motivate irrational disbelief, I need to return to the burden of my earlier article. There I argued in detail that the anti-God desire described by Nagel – at least if that desire is interpreted as an aversion to the Christian account of things – is morally perverse. It is an antipathy towards a possibility that we *ought* to want to be *true*, not one that we can properly
hope to be false. We might offer various excuses for, or explanations of, our anti-God desire but none of those, I argued, provides moral justification for it. (I shall here take as read the detail of my earlier arguments.)

If my wish is for something I recognise as good, then that fact is enough to explain why I have the wish. But if my wish constitutes a preference for something bad over something good, then it cries out for further explanation. Now, as noted in my earlier article, a probable explanation of our anti-God desire concerns our moral failings. My own awareness of my moral unsatisfactoriness – in various dispositions I harbour and actions I perform, in the kind of life I lead – may give me ample cause to fear the judgement of God. But it is important to note that that this is insufficient in itself to account for an aversion towards the Christian picture. For that picture entails not only God’s judgement but also the availability of his loving gift of forgiveness for our failings and his help to become morally acceptable, indeed morally splendid, persons. Hence my awareness of my failings gives me proper cause to be attracted to the Christian picture, not to fear it. But similarly then, my awareness of my failings can account for my aversion to the Christian picture only if it is also the case that I would prefer to persist in my current state and habits than to have them dealt with by God. And now we have identified a bundle of internal goings-on that can explain my anti-God attitude; this attitude will naturally arise if I am aware that there are things about me that would be unacceptable to God and I would prefer those things to remain unchanged rather than to have them (righteously and lovingly) transformed by God. But in thus seeing what can cause the anti-God desire, we also see why it can exert an especially powerful irrational influence. If I am so committed to my current state that I would prefer to remain as I am rather than to be very considerably changed by a God who is bent on what is best for me and for everyone else and to whom I will be unavoidably accountable, then I will be very powerfully motivated to believe that no such God exists.

Germaine Greer recently launched an historical exhibition at the University of Melbourne. The Age began its report of Professor Greer’s opening address with the following words:

Feminist Germaine Greer says she had two aims when she came to study Arts at the University of Melbourne in 1956. ‘One was to find whether God existed or not. That didn’t
take very long. The other was to lose my virginity. That took rather longer. And was more painful, as I recall.¹⁵

I take it that in saying that she aimed to lose her virginity Greer is not saying that she was seeking the right man with whom to enter a secure and loving marriage but that she sought to experience fornication. And in saying that her enquiry concerning God’s existence didn’t take very long, she is reporting, I presume, that she swiftly drew the conclusion that God does not exist. That is a remarkable report. For I know of no evidence available to any university in 1956 (or since) that would have enabled the genuine enquirer speedily and rationally to conclude that God does not exist.

But I wonder whether it has ever occurred to Greer that her two projects could have been intimately connected in a quite particular way: namely, that her pursuit of her sexual adventure determined the outcome of her enquiry concerning God’s existence. In her address she explained that she had arrived at the free-thinking university having received a rigid convent-school secondary education. Now such a school would have stressed to its pupils that fornication is unacceptable to God. And a person coming from such a school would have been likely to experience considerable cognitive dissonance had she been engaged in a committed pursuit of fornication while also believing that God does exist and she would have felt a powerful need to reduce this dissonance. Let us remind ourselves of how cognitive dissonance can be reduced. Where our behaviour is inconsistent with what we believe, there are, in simple terms, three basic ways in which we can reduce the resultant dissonance: we can change our behaviour; we can get rid of the inconsistent belief; or we can find a way either to forget the inconsistency or to make ourselves feel that it does not exist, perhaps by rationalising our actions. Now as we noted earlier, the first of those options, changing the behaviour, is closed to someone with a fixed purpose to pursue that behaviour. The third option is one that many of us manage to employ. Where fornication is concerned, we manage to forget that it is inconsistent with what we believe or we find a way to rationalise it. (Western culture has for the last few decades been flooding us with aids to assist our natural tendency to rationalise fornication.) But this is unlikely to be an easy option for a young person fresh from convent school in 1956, acutely aware of the very clear Christian prohibitions of fornication, if at the same time she accepts Christian belief. And that leaves the second option – the
obstruction of belief. For someone from such a background, with a fixed aim of fornication, this could well be the path of least resistance – especially if she starts by being unsure whether the belief is one she ought to hold. This could be the easiest way to avoid severe cognitive dissonance. In such a way, then, her commitment to her sexual adventure could cause her to conclude that Christian belief is false.

Is this the correct explanation of Germaine Greer’s atheism? I don’t know, of course. Her heart is not open to my inspection. And I would be entering dangerous territory even by presuming to venture an opinion. It may be that Greer herself does not know whether this explanation is correct. For of the nature of the case, if this explanation were correct then the relevant facts would to some extent have been hidden from her own awareness. The self-deceptive element in the motivated irrationality of her unbelief would have allowed her to think – or allowed her to allow herself to think – that she was reaching her atheistic conclusion on properly rational grounds. And this self-deceptive element carries on over time as we manage to suppress from our memory whatever irrational motivation we might once have been aware of – assisted in this process of forgetting by our immersion in an environment of unbelief. But I think that we can safely say that this could be the correct explanation of Greer’s atheism. The required elements are in place. And whether or not it is true of Greer, I think we have reason to suspect that in many other cases unbelief has been irrationally motivated in this kind of way.

And of course our sexual misbehaviour is by no means the only possible motivating force of this kind. The Apostle Paul’s various lists of what he calls the passions of the flesh indicate a myriad of ways in which our attachment to what we desire could move us towards a rejection of the belief inconsistent with the desired behaviour. Our various kinds of self-indulgence, our covetousness, our love of money, could all surely do the trick, as could our pride. My desire to live my life as master of my own destiny, subject to no authority but my own, can move me to reject any thought of God.

A few sentences after mentioning the futility of their minds, Paul describes the manner of Gentile life, in a telling phrase, as ‘corrupt through deceitful lusts’. We can identify two respects in which ‘deceitful’ is a particularly apt description of the kinds of desires we have been considering. First and obviously, the power of these desires is such as to make it very easy for us to convince ourselves that their indulgence is morally acceptable.
These desires readily convey to us an impression of their own plausibility, as it were. Or – which is much the same thing – we readily find ways to rationalise our indulgence in them. We find it easy to tell ourselves plausible lies as to why it is acceptable to give way to them. And the lies become more and more plausible and less and less necessary as our indulgence becomes habitual. But second, these desires are deceitful insofar as they prompt us to tell ourselves plausible lies about why we are rejecting belief in God. The desires can move us irrationally to reject belief in God while we tell ourselves that we are doing this on properly rational grounds.

All of these desires can be subsumed under what Pascal called the love of self. Our chosen submission to these desires can, as both Paul and Pascal put it, harden the heart – hardening it in an allegiance to the desired way of life and therefore against God. This allegiance thus functions as a reason of the heart, motivating us to reject belief in God. But because these fixed desires can operate in a way that is hidden from our own view, they can be ‘reasons’ of which, as Pascal says, reason itself knows nothing.

This, then, is the second respect in which the anti-God attitude can be peculiarly liable to motivate irrational disbelief. The attitude is likely to be due to two factors: an awareness that one’s behaviour would be unacceptable to God plus a preference to persist in that behaviour rather than to have it dealt with by God. The first factor entails that persistence in this behaviour would produce powerful cognitive dissonance if one did also believe in God. And the second factor entails that one would be unwilling to reduce such cognitive dissonance by changing the behaviour. It is likely, therefore, that the easiest way to avoid such dissonance is by avoiding belief in God. And thus one has motivation to avoid belief in God by employing the standard irrational methods: the avoidance or ignoring of evidence, the explaining away of evidence, the magnifying of contrary evidence and so on, all of which can be reinforced by one’s immersion within a culture of disbelief and all of which is, to some extent, hidden from one’s own awareness by the usual processes of self-deception.

I should stress again that we are here considering tendencies and propensities, not inevitabilities. The anti-God desire need not control us. It is up to us whether we give way to the desire or not. If we take proper care to observe scrupulously rational procedure, we can render the desire powerless to influence our beliefs. But that might take some doing. And it would, I think, be foolish to suppose that we can be protected from the desire’s
irrational influence simply by being urged to make some effort to gather and weigh the proper evidence of the existence of God and by being warned of the danger of failing to make this effort. For the desire itself might immunise us against any such entreaty in the following kind of way.

Someone tells me most earnestly that I can discover the secret that can save humanity if I climb the magic mountain and consult the oracle. This person urges me to take the journey. But I decline. Why? How can it be right not to make the effort required to discover what might possibly save humanity? That question doesn’t give me a moment’s trouble for of course I simply dismiss the story. There are countless myths and fairy stories that I similarly dismiss as unworthy of my serious attention and certainly as undeserving of my serious enquiry. For I regard their plausibility as negligible. I am disinclined to make any effort to enquire into their truth. And I assure myself that this disinclination is in no way dangerous – that it runs no risk of preventing me from discovering important truth – by reference to my sense of their implausibility. If the stories aren’t true, then there is no danger in my disinclination to believe them and no danger in my disinclination to make any effort to mount a serious enquiry into their truth.

Similarly, I can be unmoved by the entreaty to make a serious effort to enquire into the truth of God’s existence and, unmoved even by the recognition that I harbour the anti-God desire, I dismiss the Christian account of things as a fairy story. I will regard my disinclination and my anti-God attitude as quite safe. I regard myself as in no danger of being separated from important truth because I attach minimal plausibility to the Christian story. But now, how is it that I have arrived at this assessment of the story’s plausibility? As we saw earlier, it may well be that I have formed this judgement as a result of my immersion in a culture of disbelief. Membership of this culture – this milieu of social connections and habitual activity and customs – enables me to feel that disbelief is entirely natural. It allows me to feel fully confident in my dismissal of the Christian story. But how is it that I come to be immersed in this culture? It may well be, as we saw earlier, that I have naturally gravitated towards this culture and naturally inhabit this culture, because of my anti-God desire. But then my assurance of the safety of the anti-God desire is due to an outlook to which I have been moved by the anti-God desire itself. In other words, my check that the anti-God desire is not leading me into danger is a check that I perform by reference to an outlook which is safe only if the anti-God desire does not lead me into
danger. And this, of course, is no check at all. If the Christian account of things is true, then the anti-God desire can both move me to avoid the truth and assure me that I am in no danger of avoiding the truth. And by giving way to the desire, I can thereby imprison myself within a deadly ignorance of my own making.

And if that is what I have done, then the Apostle's words describe my condition with straightforward accuracy. My ignorance is due to the desires of a hardened heart. Whatever intellectual prowess I might display on other matters, the operations of my mind are futile in regard to the most important of all truths – the truths concerning the life of God.

It is a dark picture. But the messenger of Christian truth need not be greatly discouraged by the fact that we can throw away the key of our own prison of unbelief. He or she will have plenty of reason to hope that here, as elsewhere, what is impossible for men is possible for God. And an awareness of our ailment and of its underlying causal dynamics may be an important step towards its remedy.

Endnotes

1. Ephesians 4:17–18 (RSV). I leave to the historians the question of whether the words are really those of the Apostle Paul.
2. Ephesians 4:23; Romans 12:2.
12. The argument I offer in the following paragraphs is a simplified version of the argument I have presented in my ‘Desire and Disbelief’ (forthcoming).


17. Ephesians 4:22.