The sons of late-nineteenth-century English aristocrats were, if judged to be sufficiently intelligent and especially if considered to possess leadership potential, sent for the completion of their education to Oxford or Cambridge. Young Winston Churchill was not regarded as University material; he was sent instead to Sandhurst to train for the Army. Churchill relished his technical army education but it left what was in fact his enormous and penetrating intellect unsatisfied and when he emerged from his training and was posted as a cavalry officer to India he set himself an intensive course of reading in order to fill the gap. Looking back on those years in his My Early Life, Churchill relates how his reading, because it was unguided, was unbalanced and how he became unduly influenced by writers who challenged and undermined the Christian faith in which he had been brought up. He consequently ‘passed through a violent and aggressive anti-religious phase’. What brought him out of that phase was not reasoned argument to the contrary, for at that stage he had not heard it. Rather:

My poise was restored during the next few years by frequent contact with danger. I found that whatever I might think and argue, I did not hesitate to ask for special protection when about to come under the fire of the enemy: nor to feel sincerely grateful when I got home safe to tea. I even asked for lesser things than not to be killed too soon, and nearly always in these years, and indeed throughout my life, I got what I wanted. This practice seemed perfectly natural,
and just as strong and real as the reasoning process which contradicted it so sharply. Moreover the practice was comforting and the reasoning led nowhere. I therefore acted in accordance with my feelings without troubling to square such conduct with the conclusions of thought.²

And Churchill relates how, while as a young man he was reflecting on all of this, he came across a quotation ‘which seemed singularly apposite³: *Le coeur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît pas.*

Many of those who have belonged to more literate and linguistically competent generations than ours have been familiar with the quotation invoked by Churchill, which can be rather rigidly translated as ‘The heart has its reasons, that reason does not know’ (or perhaps better: ‘The heart has its reasons with which reason is unacquainted’). And many have appealed to the quotation in the kind of way that Churchill does – in support of their adhering to Christian belief in the face of reasoned argument to the contrary. It would be easy of course to dismiss this as a mere rationalisation of wishful thinking. But that diagnosis would be rejected by many of those who have appealed to the quotation. For they would say that they find within themselves not merely deep inclinations to believe, but also a heartfelt sense that these inclinations are right and proper, that they are genuinely in accord with what is wise and true or, to use Churchill’s words, that the feelings are ‘perfectly natural and just as strong and real’ as the reasoning process which contradicts them. These feelings carry with them the conviction that they ought to be followed. As Churchill goes on to say, ‘It seemed to me that it would be very foolish to discard the reasons of the heart for those of the head.’⁴

And many of those familiar with the quotation have also known its source. It comes from Pascal. It occurs as a remark in his *Pensées*, the notes towards the book which, had Pascal lived and the book been written, would surely have constituted a monumental contribution to Christian apologetics. Pascal would, I think, have approved of the way in which Churchill and others have appealed to his remark. Indeed, Pascal also remarks: ‘It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason.’⁵ (It is important, however, not to derive a false impression from this remark. Pascal certainly did not think
that faith and reason are at odds with one another and he certainly thought that there is very good reason to embrace Christian faith.)

Nevertheless Pascal’s remark about the reasons of the heart was not intended merely to point out how our believing and trusting in God can receive support from our deepest inclinations and sensibilities. His purpose was much more ambivalent than that. The full note in which the remark occurs reads, in Krailsheimer’s translation, as follows:

The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing: we know this in countless ways.

I say that it is natural for the heart to love the universal being or itself, according to its allegiance, and it hardens itself against either as it chooses. You have rejected the one and kept the other. Is it reason that makes you love yourself?6

Pascal is saying, then, that there are very different inclinations at work within the heart: there is the love of God and all goodness (‘the universal being’), but there is also a love of oneself which inclines one in the opposite direction. The heart can establish its own allegiance – either in the love of God and a hardening of itself against self-love, or in the love of oneself and a hardened rejection of God. In calling these inclinations reasons of the heart, Pascal is alluding to the role that they play in establishing our prejudices, in directing our enquiries, in influencing our beliefs and so on – a role which is performed at a deeper level than that played by reason itself and a role which may well govern the role that we allow reason itself to play. And Pascal also points out in particular that the heart’s self-love and rejection of God is by no means supported by reason. ‘Is it reason that makes you love yourself?’ he asks rhetorically and ironically.

Pascal says that the ‘reasons of the heart’ are known to us, though not to reason, ‘in countless ways’; a good deal of the Pensées is devoted to an exposure and critical examination of the ways in which these ‘reasons’, of the one kind or the other, are at work. And he is surely right to point out that we know that the heart can be hardened against God. Those of us who work in the academic world for instance are all too familiar with the fact that much of what goes on there is animated by a spirit very contrary to the love of God. We find many indications, not only of indifference to God, but of a
positive antipathy towards the possibility that God exists. And we suspect that a good deal of academic enquiring and theorising is driven by that spirit.

Such anti-God inclinations have expressed themselves in various ways in philosophical literature. We find them for instance in the wildly irrationalist and wilfully excessive writings of Nietzsche. But a very different expression, of a sober and deeply insightful kind, occurs in the writing of one of the eminent contemporary philosophers whose work I most admire, Thomas Nagel. Nagel is discussing the question of the kind of metaphysical picture that would be required to make sense of the possibility of genuine human knowledge and scientific enquiry – of how it could be true that the natural reasoning of the human mind is in such harmony with the fabric of the independent world that the one can lead us to objective knowledge of the other. And he reports that he is alarmed by the suspicion that the required metaphysical picture will be ‘religious, or quasi-religious’. And in this alarm he perceives what he calls a 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.7

Nagel’s expression of his attitude is remarkable for its refreshing candour. But he does not only give voice to his desire. Pointing out that his attitude is widely shared, he offers also some shrewd observations about its influence. This ‘fear of religion’, he believes, ‘has large and often pernicious consequences for modern intellectual life’, for it motivates unreasonable theoretical views. It is this attitude, he guesses, that ‘is responsible for much
of the scientism and reductionism of our time. Nagel believes in particular that this attitude supports ‘the ludicrous overuse of evolutionary biology to explain everything about life, including everything about the human mind.’ And all of this represents ‘a somewhat ridiculous situation’, he says, 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.’

Here we have self-aware atheistic testimony in support of Pascal’s claim: there is a deep, heartfelt aversion towards the possibility that God exists, an aversion of which reason may not be conscious, but which irrationally influences the directions in which reason is permitted to travel and the conclusions which it is allowed to draw.

Now none of this will come as much of a surprise to Christian theologians. They will be aware of a widespread antipathy to God. And they will know, with Pascal, that the biblical Scriptures diagnose this attitude and provide an account of its remedy. But they may be all too keenly aware that, as Pascal stressed, the very attitude acts as an obstacle to its own remedy and in general, that it impedes any reception of theological statements and explanations and arguments.

It seems to me that we have here a particular matter in which philosophy can provide some service to theology. Philosophers are centrally concerned with the identification and criticism of what are offered as genuine reasons for belief. Their central interest is in what beliefs we ought to hold, what we have proper ground to accept as true; and a genuine reason is what provides this ground. But a mere aversion towards the possibility that God exists is no proper indicator of the truth of atheism or of any God-less theory about some aspect of the world. As Nagel stresses, the aversion plays no proper role in the rational formation of belief. Churchill and others have felt that what they have referred to as reasons of the heart have been genuine indicators of what ought to be believed. But the mere hope that God does not exist, though it is included by Pascal amongst what he metaphorically calls ‘reasons’ of the heart, cannot of itself function as a proper indicator of the truth about anything other than the person who harbours that hope. So the first point to be stressed by philosophy is that if we are interested in the truth of a world-view then antipathy to God, as such, is to be put aside as strictly irrelevant.

But that is not where philosophy needs to leave the matter. For it is also interested in what it calls motivated irrationality – in how our desires and
attitudes can motivate us towards irrational belief or action. And if Nagel's observations are correct then the anti-God desire motivates a great deal of irrational intellectual activity. Here is a place then where philosophy can bring its tools to dissect and analyse those irrational goings-on. And here, as elsewhere, exposure and diagnosis of the disease may be the necessary first step towards its remedy. I shall seek to say something about that in a subsequent discussion. In particular, I shall argue that there are features of the anti-God desire that render it especially liable to motivate irrational belief.

But there is also another way in which philosophy can usefully examine the anti-God attitude. A person might be embarrassed about the irrational influence of the attitude without being embarrassed about the attitude itself. And many people, at least in the academic world, show that they regard it as a perfectly acceptable attitude – indeed in many cases as an attitude of which to be proud. But there is an important philosophical question to be asked here. For our desires and aversions and hopes can be good or bad or morally neutral. How should the ‘fear of religion’ be evaluated? Does its occurrence reflect well or badly upon us? That is the question that I discuss in the remainder of this article, for it seems to me that the answer to the question will expose something of considerable importance.

Let us remind ourselves of some simple facts about how we are able to evaluate desires. Consider some ordinary examples. Suppose that I am overheard voicing my malicious hope that a particular colleague will drop dead. Or suppose that, on hearing that certain strangers – ordinarily decent people for all I know – are in a perilous situation, I express my hope that they will come to grief. Each of those hopes would be wrong. Each of the desires I express would be correctly described as a bad desire, as one of which I ought to be ashamed. In fact I think that in such situations we naturally use the language of obligation. I would be told: ‘You ought not to hope those things. You ought to wish those people well. You ought to hope for a good outcome, not a bad one’. And even more strongly would these things be said if I were deliberately cultivating the relevant desire, rather than seeking to eradicate it. Indeed, even if I were to find that my desire is involuntary, I might still say of myself, ‘I ought not to hope that those people die, though I can’t help myself’ (thereby making reference to the way that my desires would be properly constituted, rather than to anything that I can straightforwardly control).
The desires we have just evaluated are preferences for one possible situation over another. And we are able to evaluate the preference because we are able to evaluate the possible situations. If one of those situations is good in respects in which the other is positively bad (and other things are equal), then we ought to prefer the former situation, and the contrary desire would be wrong. So if those possible situations represent the ways in which events could actually unfold, then we ought to hope for the good state of affairs and we ought not to hope for the bad one.

Now the desire to which Nagel gives voice is the preference for a universe without God. He has a positive aversion to the existence of God; he wants atheism to be true. Nagel does not tell us what he means by ‘God’, but I think that we can safely take him to be employing some conception of God which includes the God of Christian theology. (Given that the Judaeo-Christian conception of God is the dominant conception both in Western philosophical discussion and in Western culture generally, it would be very misleading of Nagel to use the term without further qualification if he did not intend us to take what he says to apply to that conception.) Nor does Nagel tell us what he means by ‘atheism’. But I think it is safe to interpret him as using the term in the way that most Western philosophers would use it – namely, to refer to naturalistic atheism, the world-view according to which nothing exists that transcends the natural order, the order properly described by science. And I am sure that many people who share an anti-God attitude similarly have in mind the God of Christian theology and similarly hope that naturalistic atheism is true. So this is the particular preference that I wish to concentrate upon. We can evaluate the preference by comparing the goodness or badness of the alternative possible states of affairs – the world as depicted by Christian theology, on the one hand, and the world as depicted by naturalistic atheism, on the other. And it is vital to note, for the purposes of this exercise, that we can perform this comparison without making any assumption concerning the truth, one way or the other, of either world-picture. We can assess the goodness or badness of the pictures without having any view concerning which one (if indeed either one) will turn out to be true.\textsuperscript{13}

Each of those two world-views possesses various features that can be relevantly evaluated. But a particular and outstanding point of comparison is that the Christian world-view provides an account – theologians can fill
in the details – of how good finally and decisively triumphs over evil. God’s purposes of justice and love will, on this picture, prevail. All will be made well.

Now of course it can be objected that the picture of triumphant goodness is hard to reconcile with the evident facts about the world. And Christian philosophers and theologians need to be able to offer a proper response to that objection. But that problem, it is important to remember, is not relevant here. For as I have said, we are not here asking whether the current evident state of the world gives us reason to believe that the theological picture will actually turn out to be true. The exercise we are here performing is to ask whether that picture represents a possible state of affairs that we ought to want to be true. And indeed, the worrying facts about the world, the very facts that cause some people to doubt the truth of the Christian picture, quite properly give special force to the desire that the picture be true. For if God does rule then his goodness will prevail over the evil that is now so evident. Human actions will not be the finally decisive events; and natural suffering and decay and death will not come as the end. We may not yet see how, but justice will be done, love will prevail, every tear will be wiped away, all will be made well.

And yet Nagel doesn’t want the universe to be like that. Instead, he and many others want atheism to be true. Now this does not yet show that the atheistic hope is wrong. For if the atheistic world were as good as that represented by the Christian picture, then the atheistic hope would be as satisfactory as the contrary preference. But when we inspect the kind of world depicted by atheism, it seems clear that it cannot be as good as that portrayed by Christianity. For the great good portrayed by the Christian picture – the triumph of God’s just and loving purposes – is possible only because of God’s transcendence and rule over the consequences of natural processes and human actions. But in the atheistic picture there exists nothing but those natural processes and human actions, and so nothing that could respond to and overrule their consequences.

Now the atheist might protest against the Christian reliance on God’s correction of evils and wrongs: it is up to us, he might insist, to put bad things right. And he is surely right to remind us that we must not shirk our moral duty here. But it would be quite absurd to suggest that, even if we were henceforward to do all the good that we could do, the result would be a fully satisfactory world. For apart from the fact that it is utterly unrealistic, on the atheistic supposition, to imagine that humankind will be morally
perfected, there is the unavoidable difficulty that countless injustices and horrors have not been and cannot be rectified by us. Even if we could magically transform the world from now on, we could do nothing to put right the wrongs that have been suffered by those who have died. Limited as we are by our natural powers, by space and time, we are quite incapable of the eschatological resolution of all things that is, on the Christian picture, to be brought about by God. So, as a picture of the way this world could turn out to be, the atheistic world-view entails that in ever so many instances evil prevails and justice fails to be done. And that state of affairs is very much worse than the state of affairs entailed by the Christian picture.

I stress again that this is to say nothing about which of those two world-views is true. We might – many people do – come to conclude that the atheistic picture is true after all. But given what we have noted so far, this conclusion ought to be a sad, indeed a grievous, conclusion. Yet sadness is not the spirit in which the atheistic conclusion is typically expressed. The positive aversion towards the Christian picture, the positive desire for the truth of the atheistic story, seems to be a clear wish for a bad state of affairs. But such a desire would be one of which we ought to be deeply ashamed.

We are all aware of antipathy to God, and we are all aware that it is commonly regarded as perfectly acceptable. But when we reflect afresh upon that desire, when we consider it as if with fresh eyes, it begins to look astonishingly perverse.

However, though we may be astonished by the perversity of the desire, we are not at all astonished by its presence. For we can readily understand why we might harbour the desire. God’s response to evil, on the Christian picture, entails judgement; and the prospect of judgement is – given our own moral condition – deeply disturbing. But though this fact can indeed provide some explanation of the desire, it does not provide any moral justification of it. For the fact explains the desire merely through our noting why bad people might fear a good state of affairs.

And in any case the explanation provided by the fact that we are morally unsatisfactory cannot be an adequate explanation of why we dislike the Christian picture, for it fails to take into account certain key features of the picture. According to the Christian picture, God offers us the gift of being transformed from bad persons into good ones. So our moral unsatisfactoriness gives us proper reason to be attracted to the picture, not to fear it, whereas on the other hand we would emerge very badly indeed if, having
noted this aspect of the Christian picture, we still hoped it to be false. It
is one thing to be bad; it is a much worse thing to hope to remain bad. (Of
course change for the better might, for a time, be uncomfortable. But fear of
the temporary discomfort cannot justify an aversion towards moral healing
performed in love.)

But I think that there is a further aspect of the explanation of the desire.
Nagel himself refers to his fear of religion as a ‘cosmic authority problem’.14
Now this might suggest that he fears what would amount to a lack of human
autonomy. But human autonomy, it might be said, is a good thing, properly
to be desired. And so, in recognising this aspect of the desire’s explanation,
haven’t we also disclosed its justification?

Proper human autonomy is indeed a great good. It is good for humans to
enjoy the freedom which enables them to exercise a mature and responsible
control of their own lives. It is good for them to enjoy a proper independence
– the freedom which consists in their not being controlled or oppressed or
manipulated or coerced by others. But would this good be excluded on
the Christian picture?

According to that picture humans are in fact provided with a very
considerable degree of autonomy. They are given a life and a world in which
to live that life, but how they live their life is not dictated to them by God.
They have a rich range of choices open to them: their relationships, their
projects, their habits (and thus even, to a considerable extent, the forma-
tion of their character) are matters that are largely for them to decide. The
Christian picture, in other words, entails the kind of human autonomy that
we naturally take ourselves to possess, under ideal conditions, in the actual
world – under the conditions, that is to say, in which we humans allow one another to enjoy such autonomy. (Whether that kind of autonomy can
properly be accounted for in the naturalistic picture is another matter.)

But it is quite true that on the Christian picture we do not possess an
unqualified autonomy. In stark contrast to the atheistic picture, the Christian
picture entails that we are answerable to an authority whom we have not
appointed; and it is this authority who will have the final say over our own
destiny and that of the rest of the world. So we need to ask: Would this
feature of the Christian picture be a proper cause for regret?

In order to answer this question it is helpful to think a little further
about the consequences of the picture. It entails that there are two par-
ticular respects in which our autonomy is qualified. First, we need not be
alone in the exercise of our freedom. God's authority over us includes the authority to forgive us our abuses of our freedom; and God's power over us enables him to provide us with help we cannot give ourselves. Indeed, as we have noted, God's help is available to transform us into persons who can be relied upon to use their freedom in morally proper – even morally splendid – ways; though it is (in some manner and to some extent) up to us whether we receive this gift. Now would this be a regrettable qualification of our autonomy? As we have already seen, if we care as we should about the morality of our conduct, the promise that we can be forgiven for our failure and given help to act well must surely offer a very welcome prospect. Whereas if we find this is an unwelcome prospect then it seems that we must fail to care as we should about the morality of our conduct – in which case, of course, we ought, once again, to be deeply ashamed.

The second particular respect in which our autonomy is qualified, on the Christian picture, is that it is of course limited. There will be a final analysis, in which we are called to account for the way we have exercised our freedom; and the evil outcomes of our misuse of our freedom will be dealt with in justice and love. But this is part and parcel of the great good we have already seen to be entailed by the Christian picture – God's victory over evil. Only if our abuse of our autonomy is not permitted to carry on forever unchecked can God's good purposes prevail. The final analysis is a necessary condition of the triumph of good. Hence we can have no morally proper aversion to it.

So neither of those two respects in which our autonomy would be qualified offers any ground for us to be entitled to hope that the Christian picture is false. And I see no way in which a proper desire for human autonomy could justify that hope. If we have considered the comparative features of the two world-pictures and we still prefer the atheistic picture on the ground that it promises us unqualified autonomy, then it seems to me that our preference amounts to the following attitude: 'Better that I (and others) be able to get away with acting as badly as I can, and indeed to become a very wicked person, and that there be no help available to me to become a very good person, and that the evil I do, however horrific, be allowed to carry on unimpeded, than that there be any divine check upon my freedom.' And such an attitude is surely morally untenable. Indeed, it seems to me that if we were observing that attitude in others (conveniently forgetting that it
may also be evident in ourselves), we would readily describe it as a kind of monstrous egomania.

And this, I fear, points us in the direction of the real explanation of what Nagel calls our cosmic authority problem. Theologians will have reason to suspect the fundamental sin of pride. We wish to be our own ruler, the master of our own destiny – and this we cannot be if God exists. This is the self-love which Pascal says hardens the heart against God. In finding no proper ground for this attitude, we have confirmed Pascal’s observation that self-love is not supported by reason. Yet it can control our use of reason: it can function as a ‘reason of the heart’. But the theologians will also testify to God’s response to this heart disease. As Mary’s Magnificat declares, in a statement of judgement embedded in a context of hope, ‘he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts’.

In any case, it seems to me that our little exercise in moral inspection has disclosed something very revealing. After a straightforward comparison of the respective world-views, the antipathy to God which is so widely regarded as perfectly acceptable turns out to be morally unjustifiable. The hope expressed by Nagel is a desire of which we ought to be deeply ashamed: it reveals a moral perversion in our make-up. And this is cause enough for us to be disturbed about the very presence of the desire, even before we consider the further disturbing fact that the desire can play a role in influencing our beliefs.

But how, exactly, can the aversion to God influence our beliefs, and why is it particularly liable to motivate irrational belief? That, as I have mentioned, is a subject requiring its own discussion.

Endnotes


13. The argument I offer in the following paragraphs is a simplified version of the argument I have presented in my ‘Antipathy to God’ (forthcoming).