

IS RELIGIOUS RATIONALITY INSULAR RATIONALITY?

REPLY TO JOSHUA L. GOLDING'S *THE RATIONAL DEFENSIBILITY OF BEING A TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS JEW* (1999)

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In this paper, Joshua L. Golding constructs an argument intended to show that it is rationally defensible to be a traditional religious Jew. He first provides a working definition of 'traditional religious Jew' and then moves on to the actual argument for rational defensibility.

"Roughly stated, a traditional religious Jew is a person who pursues the goal of attaining or maintaining a certain kind of good relationship with a certain kind of God in a certain kind of way." (393)

This is Golding's initial definition which he unpacks in the first part of the paper, clarifying that the good relationship with God is not a regulative ideal but a concrete state of affairs which traditional religious Jews strive towards achieving or maintaining "in real time" (394). Here are seven points of criticism which I propose for discussion.

Qualitative superiority (pp. 395, 399)

Golding describes both God and the good relationship with God as 'qualitatively superior' to other persons and relationships respectively:

"The term Supreme connotes that God is not merely better than any other possible being, but also that God is qualitatively superior to any other possible being. Differently stated, God is not merely 'a lot better' than every other possible being; rather, God is better in kind than every other possible being. Even if the goodness in all things or beings (other than God) were somehow to be combined, their goodness would not equal or even approach that of God." (395)

"Thus the good relationship with God is conceived not merely as 'a lot better' or 'vastly better' than any other goal, but as qualitatively superior to any other goal. Differently stated, the religious goal is conceived as better not in quantity but in kind than any other conceivable good a human might have: no quantitative amount of other goods (i.e., goods that a human might have independently of a good relationship with God) added together would equal the value of that relationship for that human." (399)

However, the concept of 'qualitative superiority' doesn't make sense at all if we separate it from the concept of 'being (a lot) better'. In order to compare two things A and B, they have to be comparable in some way, i.e. they must have in common some features with regard to which they can be compared. If A and B are radically different, i.e. if they don't share a single qualitative feature, a comparison makes no sense: in such a case, A is neither better, nor qualitatively superior to B, but simply radically different. For example, it would be hard to come up with a sensible comparison between an apple and the number π , simply because they share no qualitative features.¹

¹ Except, perhaps, the property of being an object, with apples being concrete objects and π being an abstract one. So if one wanted to insist on their comparability, one could say that an apple is qualitatively superior to π qua concrete object, which I find highly artificial. And in any case, if we allowed such highly artificial comparisons, then surely God/the good relationship with God could be compared with other persons/relationships on some artificial level, so that their radical difference would vanish again.

The same holds for God and the good relationship with God, which are both described in ways that suggest radical difference (“difference in kind”) from other persons/relationships. Yet if they are radically different, it makes no sense to call them “qualitatively superior”. Superiority is a relation which can hold on a common ground only, i.e. because object A instantiates property X in a way that is superior to the way in which object B instantiates property X.

Thus, either we stop calling God and the good relationship with God ‘superior’ to other persons and relationships, or we concede that God and the good relationship with God are, after all, comparable to other persons and relationships. The former solution is unattractive for reasons of piety. The latter solution deprives God and the good relationship with God of their radically different status and makes them comparable to other persons and relationships, which is problematic for Golding’s argument: if they are comparable after all, their values are comparable as well, and therefore, dependent on favourable value judgements.

Belief vs. Rational Commitment to Belief (p. 401):

Golding proposes a distinction between the concepts ‘belief’ and ‘commitment to a belief’ in order to make formal sense of cases where traditional religious Jews follow the religious rules despite a lack of a (confident) belief that God exists. In those cases, the rational commitment to the live possibility that God exists is enough to justify the respective religious behaviour without entailing full belief in God’s existence, thus leaving room for doubt:

“A person is committed to a belief B if that person engages in some practice P which it is rational to engage in only if it is rational to have belief B. Note that if a person is committed to B, that does not entail that he has belief B, nor (if he has belief B) that this belief is a rationally defensible one. However, if it so happens that he lacks belief B or that his belief B is not rationally defensible, that would provide a basis for saying that it is not rational for him to engage in practice P.” (401)

Golding gives no concrete example here, the way I understand him, commitment to beliefs necessarily manifests itself in actions, but not necessarily in beliefs. I propose the following example for illustration: A traditional religious Jew, Yankel, lives an observant life but belongs to Golding’s first category of Jews, i.e. to the ones who do not consider themselves as having achieved a good relationship with God (yet). Let’s say that Yankel’s main issue is that he doubts God’s existence. Now, according to Golding, the fact that Yankel leads an observant life shows that he is rationally committed to the live possibility of God’s existence (otherwise leading an observant life would be irrational for Yankel). This commitment does not stand in contradiction to Yankel’s doubt of God’s existence because, according to Golding, commitment to belief does not entail belief.

I am not convinced that the distinction between ‘belief’ and ‘commitment to belief’ can be upheld. This is because I doubt that a person can be rationally committed to a belief without believing it at least to some degree, simply by acting in a certain way. It is impossible to infer (commitments to) beliefs from actions alone because identically looking actions can have different (rational) motivations. Yankel could be a full-blown atheist leading an observant life because of his fear that his family would shun him if he didn’t. He could also lead an observant life because this is how he grew up and because he is too lazy to change anything just because he happens to believe that God doesn’t exist. The point is that being committed to a belief (or to the live possibility of something) implies a certain degree of belief, so that Golding’s claim that “if a person is committed to B, that does not entail that he has belief B” (401) is false.

Commitment to Logical Consequences (p. 404):

Golding even goes one step further and states

“that if a person is rationally committed to some belief, he is also committed to any belief which is a logical consequence thereof” (404).

This is a bold claim. Here are three cases to think about.

1. I am rationally committed to a (non-obviously) contradictory belief. Contradictions entail all truths. Am I rationally committed to all truths?
2. I am rationally committed to only one belief (it doesn't matter which one). Necessary truths are entailed by everything. Am I rationally committed to all necessary truths?
3. If God exists, His existence is implied by everything He created, i.e. by everything. Let's assume that He exists. So everything around me implies His existence. Why do so many people not feel rationally committed to believe in Him?

Rationally Compelling vs. Rationally Defensible:

Golding makes a distinction between the concepts ‘rationally compelling’ and ‘rationally defensible’:

“A position is ‘rationally compelling’ if it can be shown that any rational being ought to adopt that position. A position is ‘rationally defensible’ if an argument can be marshaled to support that claim or position, and if criticisms and objections to that argument can be rebutted. However, that argument might not be compelling upon all rational beings. For example, it might rest on certain assumptions which are intuitively plausible to some persons but not others. Alternatively, the argument might rest on an appeal to certain experiences which not everyone has had. Now a position is not rationally defensible if the denial or opposite of that position can be shown to be rationally compelling. However, it is possible that two opposing positions could be rationally defensible for different people.” (405)

‘Rationally compelling’ is clearly a stronger concept than ‘rationally defensible’ because it implies a doxastic imperative. Golding needs to make this distinction in order to explain why certain religious beliefs can be rational for some people without being compulsory for other ones.

Unfortunately, the distinction is very blurry and collapses as soon as one tries to render it more concrete. Specifically, the concepts ‘rational being’ and ‘ought to’ are question-begging. What exactly is a *rational being*, and what does it mean that *any* rational being *ought to* adopt a certain position? Rational beings can be rational but still lack the information necessary to adopt a rationally compelling claim. In times of vagueness, indexed possible worlds, contextualism, etc., it seems to me that, if at all, the only truths that demand unconditional consent are analytic, a priori, and necessary truths (leaving aside the issue of whether they actually exist). For all other truths, I dare say, counter-examples could be constructed to show that, under specific circumstances, even rational beings would not adopt them.

The only way to exclude such cases is by idealizing the circumstances so that rational beings are, by stipulation, beings who are in the best possible epistemic situation (uninhibited access to information, fully functioning brain, absence of illusions, etc.). The problem with such idealizations is that, even if they render the argument they were designed for coherent,

they also make it a lot less interesting. Actual human beings are not ideal thinkers and their epistemic settings are also not ideal, so what does it mean (for Golding's argument about rational compelling claims) to say that any rational being ought to adopt a certain position? Under non-idealized circumstances, hardly any truth will be rationally compelling in the way Golding envisions it. This is particularly noteworthy given that he defines rational defensibility in terms of rational compellingness: "Now a position is not rationally defensible if the denial or opposite of that position can be shown to be rationally compelling." If hardly anything is rationally compelling in Golding's sense, almost everything is rationally defensible in Golding's sense.

Live possibility:

The rational defensibility of an excessive amount of things also becomes salient in Golding's definition of 'live possibility'.

"If: (1) it is rationally defensible to believe there is (at least) some small evidence that p is true, and, (2) it is rationally defensible to believe there is no conclusive proof that p is false, then, it is rationally defensible to believe that there is (at least) a live possibility that p is true. Stated simply, as long as I have some reason to think p is true, and no definitive proof that p is false, then it is rationally defensible for me to believe there is a live possibility that p." (407)

Person A has an impressive experience E to the effect that God doesn't exist. Following Golding's argumentation, this would qualify as evidence (for A) that there is a live possibility that God doesn't exist. Moreover, there is also no conclusive proof that God does, in fact, exist. Hence, A's belief that there is a live possibility that God doesn't exist, which he infers from E, is rationally defensible (for A). The same argumentation could be run for person B, who has an experience to the effect that God does exist.

I find it hard to accept Golding's claim that two persons A and B can hold mutually exclusive beliefs while both counting as rational and while ascribing the status of 'live possibility' to both beliefs. It seems to make it way too easy to call a belief 'rationally defensible' and assign it the (admittedly vague) probability of 'live possibility'.

Internal and External Coherence:

Golding sensibly argues that coherence plays an important role in questions regarding the rational defensibility of beliefs:

"Condition 3a states that the religious Jew conceives of the Torah as the way God has given for the Jewish people to attain the good relationship with God. Again, it is rationally defensible for a person to have this conception if it is internally and externally coherent. As with any conception, its external coherence will depend on what other related notions a person has. Here we shall focus on internal coherence of the traditional conception of the Torah." (411)

It is very plausible to impose both internal and external coherence constraints on beliefs that we want to call 'rationally defensible'. Given that Golding does mention these two conditions, it is surprising that he neglects questions of external coherence almost entirely, arguing that external coherence depends on other (highly subjective) notions a person has. It seems to me that coherence with external factors is by far the most important factor to consider when we try to establish whether or not a certain belief is rationally defensible. However, Golding ignores that issue, and comes to the following conclusion:

“Until and unless it can be shown otherwise, it is coherent to conceive of the Torah as the divinely prescribed way to attain [the good] relationship [with God].” (411)

The claim that the Torah is the divinely prescribed way to attain the good relationship with God is *clearly* externally incoherent (conflicting with claims according to which other religious sources, such as the Quran or the New Testament, are the divinely prescribed ways to attain a good relationship with God).

Until and unless it can be shown otherwise, it is coherent to conceive of the Torah/ the Quran/ the Satanic Bible as the divinely prescribed way to attain the good relationship with God.

Logical form: Until and unless it can be shown otherwise, it is coherent to conceive of X as the divinely prescribed way to attain Y.

Golding proposes a schema as criterion for coherence that allows its application to mutually exclusive beliefs, so that mutually exclusive beliefs turn out coherent on that picture. I do not find this picture rationally defensible. But even if it was, I then wonder how interesting it is to say that it is rationally defensible to be a traditional religious Jew. If rational defensibility is an insular matter, where the rational standards of a certain group suffice to make a belief rationally defensible *for members of that group*, I wonder why we should care about rational defensibility then. It seems to me that lowering the standards so drastically makes rational defensibility a completely irrelevant concept.

Religious Pluralism (pp. 393, 405):

Golding claims that his approach provides the basis for “a coherent account of religious pluralism” (393). If his paper did indeed achieve such an account, it would be ground-breaking. Unfortunately, it doesn't. Rather, the argument runs into a familiar dead-end, where rationality is relativized and indexed to certain groups which share certain beliefs:

“Now a position is not rationally defensible if the denial or opposite of that position can be shown to be rationally compelling. However, it is possible that two opposing positions could be rationally defensible for different people.” (405)

The issue of relativism about truth, which is implied in all such accounts and which is usually considered self-stultifying, is not touched upon.