

## COMMENTS ON DAVID BENATAR, “WHAT’S GOD GOT TO DO WITH IT? ATHEISM AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICE”

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I enjoyed David Benatar’s paper, and am basically in agreement with many of his substantive conclusions. There are, however, two issues that I would like to raise in a collegial and somewhat speculative (read “undercooked”) spirit that may stimulate further discussion. One falls within the orbit of Jewish philosophy, while one is of more general philosophical concern.

The aim of Benatar’s piece is to unseat the following two common assumptions:

- 1) Theism entails full religious observance
- 2) Atheism entails either the abandonment or reform of religious practice

Benatar’s main focus is on the second issue, arguing for the intelligibility of an atheist committing to full traditional Jewish observance (henceforth abbreviated to TJO), and my comments will therefore focus on that, though my second point applies equally to theistic non-observance.

### **1. Non-theistic reasons for traditional Jewish observance**

Whatever the reasons behind the atheist’s TJO, they will clearly be non-theistic. One question this raises is whether having exclusively non-theistic reasons for TJO maintains its identity as *Jewish* or *religious* observance. Benatar notes the objection that atheistic practice cannot be religious unless it is motivated in the correct kind of way, but excludes theistic belief from having to factor into that motivation. All that matters is that one have “the intention to perform the action because it is a *mitzva*,” or what he terms *mitzva*-intention (397). Let us allow for the sake of argument that doing something because it is a *mitzva* does not smuggle God into the equation somewhere along the line (a view to which I imagine some might object). Could an atheist’s TJO be motivated by a *mitzva*-intention?

One of Benatar’s main arguments for the rationality of atheistic observance appeals to the idea of Jewish identity. Reconstructing an argument out of Benatar’s ideas, we could say that given the ethnic component of Judaism, an atheist might value their Jewish identity for ethnic reasons. They might also view TJO as an expression of Jewish identity, and see it (plausibly) as essential to generational continuity of the Jewish identity that they so value. Thus, defining *mitzvot* non-theistically and simply as Jewish observances - which might be a partial definition, but is certainly not an outlandish understanding of the term - it might well be that an atheist can indeed perform these acts “because they are *mitzvot*,” i.e. because they are Jewish observances that

therefore serve to maintain Jewish identity/continuity. The Jewish atheist's TJO will then indeed be based on the intention to perform a mitzva "because it is a mitzva."

This raises, however, an interesting question regarding the precise role of the ethnic element of Judaism. Take the following (admittedly outlandish) thought experiment.

Imagine that for religious reasons, a Christian values continued Jewish existence - a plausible starting point at least. Imagine too, that he believes Jewish continuity to be in peril. Given that TJO is essential to Jewish continuity, he decides to commit to TJO in the hope that it will encourage other Jews to do so. Our fictional construct would be performing the "mitzva" with the same mitzva-intention as our atheist. He is doing it precisely because they are Jewish observances, and definitely *not* because they are commanded by God. While their motivation *is* unequivocally religious, surely we would not call this *Jewish* observance. Our atheist, on the other hand, would possibly deny that his own motivation was religious, yet assert that it *is* Jewish. But the point here is that the "Jewishness" of the atheist's act is simply a function of its being a means to an end, which is Jewish continuity. But that is the same motivation as our fictional Christian. So does that make the Christian's observance into Jewish observance? Clearly not - at least from a Jewish perspective. The question, however, is how we make conceptual sense of the distinction between the two. Is there merely an ethnic distinction here or is there a genuine religious difference?

The point here is to question whether TJO for the sake of Jewish continuity is sufficient to identify a practice as "Jewish". And it seems that it can only be so if an "ethnic" Jew (and converts are included in that category) is observing the practice. Thus, the centrality of Jewish ethnicity to Judaism *as a religious matter* is brought out by Benatar's discussion, all of which raises anew an issue that goes back to Moses Mendelssohn's claim that Judaism is not a religion, at least not in the sense in which people usually understand the term. It seems to me that Benatar's discussion raises the interesting question of how exactly one defines such things as "religious motivation," and indeed Judaism as it relates to common concepts of religion, given the centrality of ethnicity to the Judaism. Indeed, it begins to call into question the idea that Jewish atheists can deny that they are religious Jews,<sup>1</sup> making Emil Fackenheim's post-holocaust claim that even secular Jews are in truth religious Jews both somewhat more plausible, and rather less dependent on the holocaust.

## **2. Logic and practical rationality**

On reading the paper I couldn't help thinking that at times Benatar was committing a category error in the way he presented matters. If I am right, however, it is an instructive category error

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<sup>1</sup> I raise the point here purely as a conceptual question. It is not my intention either to psychoanalyse or be condescending towards Jewish atheists.

that raises questions concerning a longstanding interest of mine on the relationship between thought and practice, both in general and as regards Judaism in particular.

Assumptions 1 and 2 listed at the outset speak of entailment. Reiterating those claims in negative terms, Benatar writes that “just as theists are not logically committed to orthopraxy, so atheists are not logically committed either to the reform or to the abandonment of all (non-moral) religious practice” (389). Here is my basic issue. If entailment or logic were indeed at issue, then this could have been a much shorter paper. The argument could have been that entailment is a truth-preserving logical relationship between propositions (or statements, or sentences, depending in one’s ontology, or lack thereof). Since actions are not truth-bearers, religious practices do not fall within the category of propositions. Therefore, one need not delve into the world of Jewish philosophy or religious psychology in order to establish the obvious conclusion that there cannot be a relationship of *entailment* between the propositional beliefs of an atheist and *any* act or set of acts.

Having read to this point, philosophers of a certain bent will agree wholeheartedly with my point while others will object that I am simply nitpicking. Everyone knows, it will be argued, what Benatar means and I am being wilfully obtuse. What Benatar is really interested in is whether it is in some sense “reasonable” for an atheist to engage in such practices. Presumably the idea is that since an atheist does not believe in God, he cannot believe in the divinity of the commandments, giving him no reason to keep them. But clearly, as Benatar argues, there could be other reasons for an atheist’s TJO. Either way, however, it just seems strange to speak here of logical entailment. Indeed, if actions were logically entailed by beliefs, presumably akrasia would be rendered impossible, when it is very clearly empirically possible. I know from personal experience.

Rather than maintaining the language of entailment, therefore, Benatar writes that he wishes “to make the atheistic adherent of orthopraxy intelligible to those who assume that atheism entails the abandonment of all religious practice” (385). The real question then is how to parse this notion of “intelligibility.” We can of course explain any action as being motivated in all manner of irrational ways. But Benatar seems to be speaking of reasons in the normative sense, and thus of motivations that can be seen to be coherent or reasonable. Could one, though, define such rationality in such a way as to even yield arguments that logically entail *beliefs* about actions?

It might be thought that one could construct such arguments by invoking the personal beliefs of the actor and the context of the action. Would Benatar’s paper then just reduce to an investigation into religious psychology? Not necessarily. An interesting quote from someone who famously blurred the boundaries between philosophy and psychology is instructive here. Nietzsche writes:

*An affectation on departing* – He who wants to desert a party or a religion believes it is incumbent upon him to refute it. But this is a very arrogant notion. All that is needed is that he should be clear as to the nature of the bonds that formerly tied him to this party or religion and to the fact that they no longer do so; that he should understand what kind of outlook impelled him to them and that it now impels him elsewhere. We did not attach ourselves to this party or religion on strictly rational grounds: we ought not to affect to have done so when we leave it.<sup>2</sup>

When Nietzsche speaks here of the “strictly rational” I take him to be referring to the sort of discursive propositional rationality that we set out in formal arguments. I take his point to be that this does not exhaust human “rationality,” which involves all manner of further factors that might tie one to a practice, as indeed we should expect given that we are more than just organic calculators. And if that is so, then it brings into question a highly influential view of the rationality of practice, indeed probably the view of an overwhelming majority both of laypeople and philosophers.<sup>3</sup> This is the view that I have termed elsewhere the priority of theory, whereby a practice is only deemed rational if it can be shown to have a theoretical justification. The idea is that “practice *requires* a theoretical foundation . . . to justify the practice [and] to accurately construe the nature of the practice itself.”<sup>4</sup>

It has long seemed to me that this fundamentally misrepresents the relationship between theory and practice, a misrepresentation that I suspect is also deemed to be such by Benatar. For Benatar’s point is that in the absence of entailment or any such logical connection, orthopraxy remains “reasonable” for the atheist. But if that is the case for normative reasons that are to go further than the individual psychology of the actor, it must be because there is more to practical rationality than logic or indeed propositional argument can lay bare.

The example that I often use in this context is that of teaching Judaism (one could substitute any other religion though) to those of another religion (or none). When I taught students Judaism over a course of 3 years, I would contend that by the end of the 3 years, some of them had an extremely good propositional understanding of Judaism, in some cases better than the understanding of many Jews. One could even argue that they could see the “reasonableness” of Jewish practice. Yet not a single one of them ever had a moment’s thought that they ought to convert. Now it could of course be that I just wasn’t a good enough teacher. However, for reasons that I hope are not simply self-serving, I believe that it is rather because the rationality of practices cannot be entirely encapsulated in sets of propositions, but has an irreducibly practical component that can only be accessed through actual practice itself. What they were missing was

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Wanderer and his Shadow,” §82 *Human, All Too Human*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

<sup>3</sup> I am aware that Nietzsche would put this idea to very different use, but that does not undermine my point.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Brison, “The Theoretical Importance of Practice,” in Judith De Cew and Ian Shapiro (eds.), *Theory and Practice*, (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 216-38, at 216-17. (emphasis added).

not further propositional information, but something that cannot be presented in such terms. Rather than reinvent the wheel, I will self indulgently quote myself here. The view is that “the rationality of a practice cannot be reduced to that of a set of discursive principles. The practice itself rather than any alleged propositional representation of it, contains its own rationality, a non-discursive form of rationality that is irreducibly practical. Corresponding to this ‘metaphysical’ claim concerning rationality . . . [is] the epistemological claim that there is such a thing as practical knowledge in a substantive sense that cannot be reduced to knowledge of principles and that can only be fully understood by participation in the practice itself. Actual practice rather than abstract theorizing is the mode of access to a practical form of rationality and as such it becomes indispensable for practical justifications.”<sup>5</sup>

Benatar cites priority of practice as one reason that Judaism is particularly conducive to atheistic observance. But could it be that this is not merely a descriptive truth about Judaism privileging practice over dogma, but expresses something of conceptual import: that “doing” precedes “understanding,” since there is a form of rationality that is irreducibly practical and that cannot be reduced to propositional form and be represented in purely logical argumentation. Beyond any category error, that is why a mere set of propositions will never logically entail an action. And if that is the upshot of Benatar’s paper, what are the implications more generally for moral theory - or indeed “Jewish theory” - in relation to justifying practices? And is this view, of which Judaism has possibly long been aware, an accurate view of practical rationality?

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Rynhold, *Two Models of Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 175.