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The Twilight of the *Doxai*: Or, How to Philosophize with a Whac-A-Mole™ Mallet

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Abstract
This article evaluates the hermeneutic value of the category of belief from the perspective of a broadly "continental" philosophy of religion. From Socrates's dismantling of his interlocutors' *doxai* to Pseudo-Dionysius's un-saying of the divine names to Kierkegaard's noetic divestment to Derrida's aporetic genealogies, it argues that "belief" is the target, rather than the *telos*, of philosophic scrutiny. For the authors engaged here, beliefs are phantasms—uninterrogated positions that uphold a kind of routine political, psychological, or theological order—whose unraveling opens the possibility of difference, and thus of thinking itself.

Keywords
belief, continental philosophy, Socrates, Pseudo-Dionysius, Kierkegaard, Derrida

In her recent work on religion in American literature, Amy Hungerford seeks to correct what she sees as an excessive devaluation of the category of "belief" among religious studies scholars (2010). This retreat from belief—one might even call it an allergy—could be attributed to a number of different factors, but the most commonly invoked include: belief's basis in specific forms of Christianity; its location in the purportedly individual human subject; and its tendency, along with the equally fraught category of "experience," to shield religion from critique, comprehension, or even articulation (see Smith 1988; Lopez 1998; King 1999; McCutcheon 2001).

Having been invited to reflect upon the analytic usefulness of belief within my own field (a broadly "continental" philosophy of religion), I have come to realize I may be one of these belief-averse religionists myself. I have never written about belief; I avoid talking about it in casual conversation; and I don't teach it as a marker of what counts as "religion." To the contrary, I confess that

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I expend a great deal of energy trying to eliminate the term from my classroom vocabulary altogether, driving the words "belief," "personal," and "experience" like demons out of my unconsciously Protestant students during the first few weeks of Religion 101.

Like many rituals, this one never quite sticks, so I find myself repeating the exorcism two years later in our department's Majors Colloquium in Religious Studies, manically swatting at belief as if I were playing that old arcade game, Whac-A-Mole™. It's a strange little set-up: the player stands with an oversized mallet, and is charged with the task of bludgeoning the plastic moles that surface repeatedly through holes in the machine. As the game continues, the moles spring up faster and faster, asserting themselves in so many places that it's impossible to whack them all at once. At the risk of trivializing my vocation, this is what the first quarter of the semester often feels like. "Buddhists believe in the Four Noble Truths"—*whack*. "Religion means belief in God"—*whack*. "All religions believe the same thing"—*whack*.

But why do I whack this way? What is it that makes me refuse belief more or less every time it springs up, and is it a helpful refusal? Hungerford has argued that religionists' denigration of this category prevents their coming to terms with texts and communities whose self-understanding *is* structured around "belief"—even if it is only a "belief in meaninglessness" (2010: xv). I find this reasoning to be fully convincing on its own terms, yet I have also come to realize that "belief" is *not* a central analytic category to the philosophical and theological texts with which I tend to work. In fact, many of these texts explicitly reject belief as inimical to thinking itself. So for better or worse, and with apologies to Friedrich Nietzsche (2009), I think I learned to philosophize with a Whac-A-Mole™ mallet from *them.*

In a Platonic dialogue called the *Theaetetus*, Socrates tells his interlocutor that all philosophy begins in "wonder" (*thaumazein*) (1992: 155d). While the meaning of this term is not immediately clear, it takes on a more distinctive shape as the dialogue progresses: wonder, for Socrates, responds to a sudden divestment of knowledge. Wonder hits when the learner realizes she does not understand what she thought she understood. For example, Socrates and Theaetetus spend this particular dialogue trying to understand "what on earth *knowledge* (*epistêmê*) really is" (145e). At first, this might seem a strange undertaking—after all, who doesn't know what it means to know? Yet precisely because it seems so familiar, knowledge is remarkably difficult to define. Socrates navigates this difficulty maieutically, inducing his student to deliver his own opinions, or beliefs (*doxai*), about the nature of knowledge. In response, Theaetetus offers three perfectly reasonable definitions of knowledge—one of which is that knowledge is "true opinion" or "true belief" (*alêthês doxa*) (187b).

But under Socratic scrutiny, each of these beliefs about knowledge turns out to be insubstantial; as Socrates puts it, each of Theaetetus's *doxai* is a mere *eidôlon*, an "image" or "phantom." They give the illusion of solidity but then disappear like dreams once they are subjected to rigorous inquiry (150b-e).

And as it turns out, undermining *doxai* is all this text does. The conversation never produces a definition of knowledge; rather, Socrates shows Theaetetus that all his beliefs about the matter are mere "wind-eggs (*anemiaia*) and not worth rearing" (210b). In other words, all Theaetetus learns from his conversation with Socrates is that he does not know what it is to know. And it is this sort of radical doxic divestment that prompts Theaetetus to tell Socrates he is "lost in wonder." Something ordinary has become strange; something he thought he understood is now inscrutable, and the whole process is making his "head spin." To this, Socrates infamously responds, "this is an experience which is characteristic of a philosopher, this wondering: this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else" (155d; see Rubenstein 2009: 1-7). So if philosophy begins in wonder, and if wonder responds to the dissolution of beliefs, then for this dialogue at least, *philosophy begins where belief ends*. The task of thinking for Plato's Socrates is to expose our ordinary *doxai* as the untheorized phantoms they tend to be—to take beliefs away, rather than to build them up.

This is not to say that "philosophy" thus construed is at odds with "religion," that it is the task of thinking, say, to undermine whatever it is that "believers" believe. To the contrary, theology often performs its own dismantling of beliefs—particularly through its more apophatic, or negative, strands. In the *Mystical Theology*, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius teaches his initiate that uninterrogated predications about God are actually impediments to the soul's journey to God (1987: 1000a-b). The problem is a kind of intellectual self-satisfaction: we tend to think we know what we are saying when we proclaim that "God is good," "God is powerful," "God is a rock," or even "God is." And it is precisely this illusion of conceptual mastery that prevents us from knowing God at all. The (un)work of mystical theology, then, is not to shore up these beliefs about God, but rather to take them away—to "unsay" them in a progressive dismantling of *doxai*. "So this is what we say," writes Pseudo-Dionysius:

> The Cause of all is above all and is not inexistent, lifeless, speechless, mindless.... Again as we climb higher we say this. It is not soul or mind.... It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light.... It is not kingship, it is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness.... It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being.... Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these.... It is also beyond every denial (1040d-48b).

With each denial, something the learner thought he knew about God is taken away, until even the taking away is taken away and the knowing self *itself* is undone, taken up into the darkness of God beyond belief (1001a).[1]

Insofar as it names a kind of assertorial knowledge, "belief" can be said to undergo a similarly systematic destruction in the pseudonymous work of Søren Kierkegaard—most noticeably, in the texts written by Johannes Climacus. The problem with Christendom, Climacus laments, is not that people do not know enough, but that they know too much; an endless stream of what he calls "objective truths" stands between them and any sort of "subjective appropriation" of truth (Kierkegaard 1992: 27-9). Objective truths become a particular impediment when one considers that the truth of Christianity is inherently paradoxical (the eternal, that which cannot by definition come into time, has come into time), and therefore cannot be known objectively. Christian truth for Climacus concerns not the "possible and the probable," but rather the improbable and the impossible, and so one can only laugh at the person who tries to prove what faith seeks, or for that matter who rejects the notion of a "god in time" on the grounds of its being improbable. "I'm the paradox," Climacus writes in the *Philosophical Fragments*; "how could I be probable?" (Kierkegaard 1985: 52).[2]

Channeling Socrates, Climacus therefore endeavors not to instill beliefs about Christianity, but rather to take them away—to make every doctrine from sin and redemption to creation and incarnation repellant, unassimilable, *strange* (Kierkegaard 1992: 384; see Rubenstein 2001). In an age, Climacus writes in a footnote, when speculative philosophy claims to have swallowed truth whole,

> when this is the case, the art of being able to *communicate* eventually becomes the art of being able to *take away* or to trick something away from someone. This seems strange and very ironic, and yet I believe I have succeeded in expressing exactly what I mean. When a man has filled his mouth so full of food that for this reason he cannot eat and it must end with his dying of hunger, does giving food to him consist in stuffing his mouth even more, or instead, in taking a little away so that he can eat? (Kierkegaard, 1992: 275).

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[1] One could attribute a similar dismantling of knowledge to Meister Eckhart, whose soul must "detach" itself from everything it knows in order to be united with God. In a sermon on Matthew 5:3, Eckhart writes, "whoever will be poor in spirit, he must be poor of all his own knowledge, so that he knows nothing, not God or created things or himself" (1981). I have addressed the apophatic strategies of Pseudo-Dionysius and Eckhart at greater length in Rubenstein, 2003.

[2] I have taken a slight liberty with the text: the passage reads, "the paradox itself says: Comedies and novels and lies must be probable, but how could I be probable?"

Climacus, then, is not trying to instill Christianity in his reader; rather, he is trying to take it away. He is trying to induce his reader to realize she is not by any means Christian; that she does not comprehend what she thinks she comprehends, precisely because the matter is incomprehensible. Only from this space of doxic divestment might she be able to make a genuine *decision* about Christianity, based not on its probability, but rather on its absurdity, its impossibility (1985: 49-59).

Jacques Derrida retains the Kierkegaardian structure of the paradox without its Christian content when he says that a genuine decision, if there were such a thing, would mark the "possibility of the impossible" (1995: 147). By this, Derrida means that the only decision worthy of the name would be an undecidable decision; after all, if I know how to decide, then the decision I make is a calculation—the operation of a formula—rather than a decision (1999: 117). By pushing the notion of decision beyond the calculable, the possible, and the probable, Derrida is not looking to say "decisions never happen"; rather, he is looking to open the possibility of that which remains unthinkable within the existing political, economic, and historical order. "Impossible" things like justice, genuine democracy, or radical hospitality (Derrida 2001, 2002, 1994). As Derrida began to make clear in the late 1980s, the deconstructive gesture seeks to open the possibility of these impossibilities by pointing out the conceptual instability of our *ordinary* notions of justice, democracy, and hospitality—which inexorably fall short of their ideals (1988: 116). And, thinking back to Socrates, destabilizing the concepts and practices we take for granted amounts to unsettling our *doxai*, our *beliefs*. But why beliefs? What is so dismantle-worthy about belief?

As Ellen Armour has recently argued, each of the structures that deconstructive thinking seeks to undermine rests on the phenomenon of belief (2011). The ontotheological God, the transcendental subject, the metropole, the phallus, capital, the nation-state, progress, presence, the sovereign—none of these lynchpins of what Derrida called the "globalatinized" order can be said to *be* independently of belief. They are all massively powerful phantasms (*eidôla*) whose violent operations are sustained solely because we believe in them. So any attempt to expose these purportedly self-evident concepts as politically motivated; historically produced; specifically raced, gendered, classed; and at the end of the day ontologically incoherent can be interpreted as an effort to unsettle belief—not for its own sake, but for the sake of previously unimagined ethical, political, and interpretive possibilities.

In response to the question of whether belief retains some conceptual usefulnes, I therefore find myself answering "no and yes." In this corner of religious studies, at least, belief does not come into play except insofar as it remains

the perpetual target of what Foucault called "permanent critique" (1984: 42). Belief is the mole that keeps springing up to reaffirm the very order that it undermines, its perennial resurgence a function of the *holes* it reveals in the phallogocentric order. Like my students' eternally recurring beliefs about belief, "belief" in this sense would name an unexamined opinion—a position one has perhaps never thought to interrogate, which suddenly seems untenable in the face of historical, cultural, or philosophical critique. One could therefore say that it is only by clearing out "belief" that thinking can function at all. It is only by whacking away at the self-evident that we can begin to imagine things otherwise.

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