
Newton and an Example of Appeal to Authority

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12 July 2010

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Theists often use *appeal to authority* (also known as *argument from authority*) to support their religious claims. This is often done by appropriating famous intellectuals and arguing that these people have authority and agree, or agreed, with the theist. This article examines a particularly flawed example of an argument from authority by Professor Arthur B. Anderson, in his article, *Sir Isaac Newton and the Bible*, on the *Reformation Online* web site at <http://www.reformation.org/newton.html> and explains why it is flawed and dishonest. I have selected Professor Anderson's article as a particularly awful example of an appeal to authority, for illustrative purposes.

Newton and an Example of Appeal to Authority

Isaac Newton (born 1642 – died 1727) is often credited with starting “modern” science. He applied considerable brilliance to solving problems of his time. Probably the greatest of his achievements was dealing with the issue of why the planets orbit the sun in the way that they do. In Newton’s time it was already known that the planets orbited the sun, and, early in the 17th century, laws describing the motion of the planets mathematically had been deduced by Johannes Kepler (born 1571 – died 1630), a German astronomer. Newton’s stroke of genius was the realization that the same force that makes an object fall to the ground on Earth is the same force that makes the planets orbit the sun in the way that Kepler’s laws describe, and is the same force that explains the way that the moon orbits the earth. Newton needed to express this mathematically, but the mathematics at the time was just not up to the job. Unperturbed, Newton developed a new mathematical technique which he called *fluxions*, now known to high school and university students as *calculus*.

Some theists claim that Newton believed in God and then expect an atheist to say something like, “Oh well, okay. I suppose there is a God after all.” A good example of how a theist can use Newton to attempt an appeal to authority is provided by Professor Arthur B. Anderson in his article, *Sir Isaac Newton and the Bible*, on the *Reformation Online* website at <http://www.reformation.org/newton.html>, and this is what we will be looking at here.¹

Writing this does *not* mean that I take Professor Anderson particularly seriously. I think his article exposes him as a deluded bigot and a complete idiot. In fact, so terrible is his article that if he really is a professor, I think a university would have to have been insane to employ him. I will also take the unusual step (for me, in an article) of warning readers that the rest of the *Reformation Online* website is suggestive of insanity. I merely selected one example of a theistic appeal to authority to criticize: Many other articles by equally delusional and dishonest people are out there.

If I wished to use a similar strategy to that of many theists with whom I have debated I would be seeking to show here that Newton did *not* believe in God, or perhaps that he declared himself an atheist on his deathbed. I cannot do this however, as I have to admit that there is considerable evidence that Newton *did* had a strong belief in God.

Evidence of Newton’s religious belief is provided in a letter that he wrote to the Reverend Richard Bentley, in which he stated the following.

¹ Anderson, A.B., ?. *Sir Isaac Newton and the Bible*. [Online] Reformation Online. Available at: <http://www.reformation.org/newton.html>.

"I had an eye upon such principles as might work with considering men for the belief of a deity; and nothing can rejoice me more than to find it useful for that purpose."

Here Newton appears to be saying that he was pleased to find that his own work was consistent with the idea of a higher being.

In his dishonest attempt to use Newton in an argument from authority, "Professor" Anderson (I will be generous and assume there really is, or was, a person with this name and title and that a university was demented enough to award it to him) first needs to establish Newton's credentials, so that we all know that whatever he believed about religious matters should also be believed by us. This is how he does it.

"Isaac Newton was the greatest scientist who has ever lived. It is, in fact, generally accepted that he is the greatest scientist who ever will live, since no one, no matter how brilliant, will ever again be in such a unique historical position."

It would be difficult to question Newton's genius, but this is not enough for Professor Anderson who wants to elevate him to the position of the greatest of all the scientists who ever existed in the past or *will exist in the future*. He does this by saying that nobody, no matter how brilliant, can ever be in the position to do what he did. Newton is often credited with devising the scientific method, but progress on this had been made earlier by Galileo Galilei (born 1564 – died 1642) who did a series of experiments with motion, and analyzed the results to find out how objects move, and accelerate under the effect of gravity, rather than simply accepting the prevailing views of the time. Galileo, for example, knew that an object falling towards the ground accelerates at a constant rate, increasing its speed by about ten meters per second for every second that it is falling. Before Newton, the idea of studying nature and devising mathematical rules that could be tested against it was not new.

Am I saying that Newton is overrated? Not really. As well as doing a lot of the basic work in optics, his main achievement was in his theory of gravity. His brilliance lay in the idea that the same laws operate everywhere in the universe, which, in Newton's time was effectively the solar system, and that the same laws could describe how an object falls to the ground on Earth, how the planets orbit the sun and how the moon orbits the earth. This idea of universal law, and its use to explain things on such a scale was unprecedented in science.

Professor Anderson is probably correct when he says that nobody will ever make Newton's achievements again. After all, Newton was the first person to apply this universal law. Nobody else, no matter how brilliant they are, can be the first person to apply it, because the same thing cannot be discovered for the first time twice. As this discovery of universal law is arguably the greatest achievement in science, then we could claim to be justified in saying that Newton is the greatest scientist who will ever exist. If it can be shown that Newton is the greatest scientist who will ever exist, then Professor Anderson's case may, it could be argued, win a lot of credibility (and quite

wrongly, in my view). This would mean that any scientist wheeled out by atheists to say that there is *no* God, or even any number of scientists, at any time in the future, could be written off as inadequate by theists, because such scientists would not be Newton, the “greatest scientist of all time”.

This is a questionable argument. The reason that nobody else can be like Newton is that *he has already done it*. Professor Anderson actually says this when he states the following.

“...no one, no matter how brilliant, will ever again be in such a unique historical position.”

This may make Newton the greatest scientist of all time, both in the past and in the future, but is this the sort of greatness which makes him more authoritative than anybody else on religion? If somebody else alive now is as brilliant as Newton then should we say that he is less authoritative than Newton, because he was born too late to be in the same “unique historical position”? Newton was born earlier, and so had a head start! The idea that Newton must be the most authoritative person who will *ever* live is therefore easily shown to be nonsense.

We still have the idea, even if Newton is not necessarily the most authoritative person who will ever be born, that he is the most authoritative person born so far. Newton did cause what is called a “paradigm shift”, a change in our basic understanding of the world, but paradigm shifts have been made since, most notably, probably, by Albert Einstein (born 1879 – died 1955), with his theory of relativity. Was Einstein as brilliant as Newton? Short of putting Einstein in seventeenth century England and seeing if he can come up with the theory of gravity all by himself we will never know, but to say that Newton *must* be more authoritative is absurd.

That leaves the proposal that Newton is the most authoritative person who has *ever* been born and said anything about religion. Newton’s work showed his brilliance, but how do we know that nobody of comparable brilliance was *ever* born earlier in history? Ancient Greek philosophers were laying down the foundations of modern philosophy well before Newton’s time. Why did nobody perform Newton’s great feat before he came about? One explanation is that Newton took the knowledge already available, and the way of looking at things that already existed in his culture, and extended it to make his great achievement. The idea of using mathematics to describe physical laws was already established in Newton’s time and was not so obvious to many earlier scientists. The idea that the planets orbit the sun, a necessary idea to have before you can even start to devise theories of gravity to predict their motion, was an accepted fact in Newton’s time. Newton needed to know how the planets moved so that he could work out a theory of gravity to explain that motion and he benefited from the fact that painstaking observations had been made of planetary motion. In fact, Newton did not merely rely on these observations: He used the laws previously determined by Kepler,

which described the motion of the planets, and devised his own theory of gravity to explain them. Newton had access to information, previous work done by others and ways of thinking that were only available in his time.

Newton was actually aware that his work was built on the work of others. In 1676, in a letter to another English scientist, Robert Hooke (born 1635 – died 1703), Newton wrote the following.

“If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

There is some controversy about what Newton meant by this. Hooke and Newton were in a bitter dispute, because Hooke claimed that he had devised the law of gravity before Newton did. One opinion is that when Newton says this, he is not being humble but is in fact saying, “I could achieve what I did by basing my work on the work of great thinkers, not on little, trivial people like you.” It is clear, from his words though, that Newton does regard science as a cumulative progress which builds on previous knowledge, and he recognizes that he has used knowledge previously acquired by others to make his discoveries.

Given that Newton’s work did build on the previous work of others, and the ways of thinking that they had devised, it would have been very difficult for a scientist or philosopher who came on the scene much earlier, for example by being born in ancient Greece, to achieve what Newton did, even if this scientist were as brilliant as Newton. If a person were as brilliant as Newton, but were merely unfortunate enough to be born too early, before the ideas and ways of thinking that Newton used had been established, it makes no sense at all to say that such a person *had to be* less authoritative on religious matters than Newton, merely because he did not make Newton’s breakthroughs.

A theist could respond to this by saying that the people who lived before Newton could not achieve what Newton did because they were *generally* limited by their time. Such a view would maintain that there was nobody living in ancient Athens, for example, who was as competent as Newton in dealing with scientific and philosophical matters because they had not been exposed to the advanced ideas and ways of thinking to which Newton was exposed. The idea would be that the same circumstances that limit someone in an ancient society and prevent *them* from doing as Newton did also limit their philosophical abilities, so that Newton is more authoritative in religious matters, partly *because* of when he was born. This would be a fatal argument for the theist to use: If we are to say that people are limited by the level to which science and philosophy has progressed in their time then why should we not presume that Newton was similarly limited? The whole case actually works better as an argument *against* Newton being authoritative, given that human knowledge has increased since Newton’s time. We could use the same argument, for example, to suggest that Newton’s failure to devise Einstein’s theory of relativity was due to the limited state of knowledge of his

time, and that this limited state of knowledge makes *Einstein* more authoritative than Newton.

People can also be limited by the culture of their time. Newton was born in an England where religious belief, and Christianity in particular, was widely regarded as the default position and in which the entire society was geared up to indoctrinating people into Christianity. Why should we presume that by being brilliant at science Newton was somehow immune to the effects of indoctrination?

Even if we admit Newton to have some unique skill in science, never seen before his time and never again to be repeated, why should it follow that he is *automatically* authoritative on *everything*? If that is the case then is Newton also authoritative on politics? Should we perhaps search his books for any opinions on fashion? This position assumes that religious belief is the result of purely logical consideration and that someone like Newton would merely consider things logically without being influenced by emotions, prejudices, preconceived ideas, cultural inputs, flawed education or specific weaknesses in thinking.

Professor Anderson's dishonest argument starts to appear more bizarre when we consider what the situation would be if Newton had died at birth and had never assumed his position as a giant of science. Professor Anderson would then presumably need a *different* person on which to confer this supreme authority. What if this person died soon after birth? Would the next greatest scientist suffice as being totally authoritative? If we keep doing this then we will eventually (and probably quite soon) find an accomplished scientist who thinks that religion is ridiculous. If all the people who were greater than him had died shortly after birth, making this scientist the greatest one, would this scientist now be authoritative? How can we entertain a situation where somebody could be viewed as authoritative merely by virtue of greater people who disagree *not* being born?

Of course, none of this seems to matter to Professor Anderson, who is merely intent on proving his case without regard for such secondary things as honesty. Having "proved" that Newton is authoritative on religious matters, Professor Anderson then brings his wretched argument to the following conclusion.

"If the greatest scientist who ever lived had no problem believing the Bible, what excuse will evolutionists, atheists, agnostics, or other so called men of science have on Judgment Day!!"

It is notable that there is a clear appeal to our sense of fear here as well. We might ask what would have happened if Newton had been an *atheist* and had spent his life, when not doing science, condemning religion. Professor Anderson would *not* have used him as an authority and would have criticized any argument that Newton was clearly right on religious matters. This is because Professor Anderson is *dishonest*.

Another problem with this is that, in Professor Anderson's imaginary "Judgment Day" scenario, the atheist or agnostic could say, "Sorry God! I wasn't as clever as *the greatest scientist who ever lived*. I assume you aren't sending me to hell for not being clever enough?" By using such an absurd argument, Professor Anderson has, like anyone trying to propose a genius as an authority to support his religion, merely revealed the god in which he believes to be a monster who would punish someone for not being intelligent enough to realize that he existed. This is inescapable when God belief is made an intellectual issue. The idea of a god who punishes us for lacking in cognitive faculties is problematic, to put it mildly, as I stated in a previous article.² Theists often seek refuge from objections like this by saying that belief is not an intellectual issue: that we all really know that God exists and atheists just reject him, or that atheists just do not want to believe. Such defenses fail when you have proposed that someone presumed to be intellectually competent in some area should automatically have authority when speaking about religion: It has been made an *intellectual matter*. The god being claimed to exist here is like a teacher who sets you some mathematics questions and then punishes you severely because you did not get the same answers as "the smartest student in the class". The fact that Professor Anderson and other theists even imagine that this is a good way of arguing for the existence of a good creator reveals something quite obnoxious about their whole belief system.

Ultimately, Professor Anderson's argument, as a classic example of the fallacy of appeal to authority, was doomed to fail. There was no integrity in it. Instead, it is just a crude attempt to appropriate a famous person to support his own brand of superstition and bigotry.

² Almond, P., 2009. *Is it fair for God to reward belief and punish disbelief?* [Online] paul-almond.com. Available at: <http://www.paul-almond.com/RewardForBelief.pdf> or <http://www.paul-almond.com/RewardForBelief.doc>.

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