Phil Religion: “Paradoxes of Conviction”

Nurtured Belief

It should give us pause that we would not have beliefs that are central to our lives—beliefs, for example, about important matters of politics and religion—if we had not been brought up as we in fact were. It is an accident of birth and upbringing that we have them, rather than beliefs sharply rival to them, and (here’s the rub) we shall frequently have to admit, if we are reflective and honest, that we consequently do not believe as we do because our grounds for our beliefs are superior to those which others have for their rival beliefs. (Cohen, p. 9)

Cohen’s Argument (pp. 12–13, slightly revised)

1. It is not rational to believe P rather than Q when you lack good reason to believe P rather than Q.

2. (Cohen’s Principle.) If you cannot justifiably believe that your grounds for believing P are better than another’s grounds for believing Q, then you lack good reason to believe P rather than Q.

3. People in Nurtured Belief cases continue to believe P even though they know they cannot justifiably believe their grounds for believing P are better than another’s grounds for believing Q.

4. So people in Nurtured Belief cases believe P irrationally.