

TOP THINKER SHOWS "EXCEPTION PROVES THE RULE" IS NONSENSE

Richard Robinson, *An Atheist's Values*, 1964.

Richard Robinson in this well written and once popular book is clear that secular values are needed and can be justified without God and indeed should be. He did not like the term humanist but did accept being labelled as a liberal. Robinson was a true atheist and nothing in his work can be said to have smuggled in Christian values. For example, he rejects love of neighbour in favour of making a choice not to make others more miserable than what they are or can be. So he is not about good directly. He cautions that good is always flawed and has the power to go wrong. He wants us to give ourselves the gift of living in reality not some illusion.

QUOTE: "A horrible example of acquiescing in inconsistency is provided by a certain common way of taking the doctrine that 'the exception proves the rule'. Many people take this to mean that, for example, you can prove that it is a rule that women are inferior to men by producing an exceptional woman who is not inferior. They imply that a universal generalization is proved to be true by the production of a case in which it is false! This is selfcontradictory and absurd. An exceptional woman who was superior to men would not prove a universal rule that all men are superior to all women. On the contrary, she would disprove it completely for all time. And as to a statement about averages, for example that the average man is superior to the average woman, it is neither proved nor disproved by any individual case of anything at all. What then is the value of this common doctrine that 'the exception proves the rule'? Is it just a piece of insanity? Yes, as commonly used today it is just a piece of insanity. But it has arisen out of a sane procedure in the lawcourts. Wherever men make and enforce rules of action, it is possible for them to allow some exceptions to their rules. If a governor is known to have said 'I make an exception in your favour', this is good evidence that the governor generally follows a certain rule, which he is breaking in this special case. The fact that the governor says he is making an exception shows that he has a rule. The exception proves that there is a rule. This is sane inference. But when it is transferred from the sphere of human rules of action to the sphere of laws of nature, insanity results. The phrase can also make sense if taken as a reference to the fact that apparent exceptions sometimes turn out on closer examination not to be exceptions at all, and thus strengthen our belief in the general statement. Thus punishing people for ignorance appears to be an exception to the rule that they should be punished only for their voluntary acts; but it may turn out that they are punished for ignorance only when that ignorance is due to a voluntary act of theirs."

COMMENT: A good refutation of a common vicious superstition. The exception only proves the rule is not allowed to be a rule in all cases. The exception proves the rule idea is used by Christians who say that the rule is dead men stay dead but Jesus alone rose and was the exception. The exception is not an exception but a case of, "The rule is right and so should not be broken but I will break it in this case." In Jesus case, the rule of nature is broken. And if all people should stay dead then it is immoral for Jesus to be raised.

Using "the exception shows the rule to be right" disguises ignorance. It is hiding how you don't think the rule is good. So that is why I link it to arguments from ignorance.

QUOTE: "The argument from ignorance is often concealed in the form of a question. When a man has no argument whatever in favour of his thesis that pigs have wings, he can still impose it on many of the unwary by putting it in the form of a question: Who can say whether after all pigs may not have wings? The implication is that, in view of the general ignorance of man, you would be a rash fool to assert that pigs have no wings."

QUOTE: "The worst form of the argument from ignorance masquerading as a question is the 'how can' or 'how could' form."

COMMENT: Say that to the person who says God must have made the world or made us have a moral sense where we feel our conscience is commanding us with moral authority.

QUOTE: "The 'how can' form of argument is dishonest. By using this form the speaker conceals the fact that it is he who is making an assertion and thus incurring a responsibility. He insinuates falsely that the responsibility is all on you for not admitting the assertion. Instead of openly making his assertion and taking the responsibility for it, he insinuates that you ought to believe it unless you can answer some 'how' question.

COMMENT: So "How can the world exist without God?" is expecting you to show how it can be done. But it is not you asking the question or making the assumption! Yet all assertions that there is a God have that question in the backdrop. God is not an assertion but a question and thus is fundamentally dishonest.

“Often the best way to meet one of these bogus questions is to reply: A question is not an argument, only statements can be arguments.”

