

Theism, Atheism, and Rationality

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Atheological objections to the belief that there is such a person as God come in many varieties. There are, for example, the familiar objections that theism is somehow incoherent, that it is inconsistent with the existence of evil, that it is a hypothesis ill-confirmed or maybe even disconfirmed by the evidence, that modern science has somehow cast doubt upon it, and the like. Another sort of objector claims, not that theism is incoherent or false or probably false (after all, there is precious little by way of cogent argument for that conclusion) but that it is in some way *unreasonable* or *irrational* to believe in God, even if that belief should happen to be true. Here we have, as a centerpiece, the *evidentialist* objection to theistic belief. The claim is that none of the theistic arguments—deductive, inductive, or abductive—is successful; hence there is at best insufficient evidence for the existence of God. But then the belief that there is such a person as God is in some way intellectually improper—somehow foolish or irrational. A person who believed without evidence that there are an even number of ducks would be believing foolishly or irrationally; the same goes for the person who believes in God without evidence. On this view, one who accepts belief in God but has no evidence for that belief is not, intellectually speaking, up to snuff. Among those who have offered this objection are Antony Flew, Brand Blanshard, and Michael Scriven. Perhaps more important is the enormous oral tradition: one finds this objection to theism bruited about on nearly any major university campus in the land. The objection in question has also been endorsed by Bertrand Russell, who was once asked what he would say if, after dying, he were brought into the presence of God and asked why he had not been a believer. Russell's reply: "I'd say, 'Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!'" I'm not sure just how that reply would be received; but my point is only that Russell, like many others, has endorsed this evidentialist objection to theistic belief.

Now what, precisely, is the objector's claim here? He holds that the theist without evidence is *irrational* or *unreasonable*; what is the property with which he is crediting such a theist when he thus describes him? What, exactly, or even approximately, does he mean when he says that the theist without evidence is *irrational*? Just what, as he sees it, is the problem with such a theist? The objection can be seen as taking at least two forms; and there are at least two corresponding senses or conceptions of rationality lurking in the nearby bushes. According to the first, a theist who has no evidence has violated an intellectual or cognitive

duty of some sort. He has gone contrary to an obligation laid upon him-perhaps by society, or perhaps by his own nature as a creature capable of grasping propositions and holding beliefs. There is an obligation or something like an obligation to proportion one's beliefs to the strength of the evidence. Thus according to John Locke, a mark of a rational person is "the not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proof it is built upon will warrant," and according to David Hume, "A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence."

In the nineteenth century we have W.K. Clifford, that "delicious *enfant terrible*" as William James called him, insisting that it is monstrous, immoral, and perhaps even impolite to accept a belief for which you have insufficient evidence:

Whoso would deserve well of his fellow in this matter will guard the purity of his belief with a very fanaticism of jealous care, lest at any time it should rest on an unworthy object, and catch a stain which can never be wiped away.[1]

He adds that if a

belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence, the pleasure is a stolen one. Not only does it deceive ourselves by giving us a sense of power which we do not really possess, but it is sinful, stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind. That duty is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence, which may shortly master our body and spread to the rest of the town. [2]

And finally:

To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.[3]

(It is not hard to detect, in these quotations, the "tone of robustious pathos" with which James credits Clifford.) On this view theists without evidence-my sainted grandmother, for example-are flouting their epistemic duties and deserve our disapprobation and disapproval. Mother Teresa, for example, if she has not arguments for her belief in God, then stands revealed as a sort of intellectual libertine-someone who has gone contrary to her intellectual obligations and is deserving of reproof and perhaps even disciplinary action.

Now the idea that there are intellectual duties or obligations is difficult but not implausible, and I do not mean to question it here. It is less plausible, however, to suggest that I would or could be going contrary to my intellectual duties in believing, without evidence, that there is such a person as God. For first, my beliefs are not, for the most part, within my control. If, for example, you offer me \$1,000,000 to cease believing that Mars is smaller than Venus, there is no way I can collect. But the same holds for my belief in God: even if I wanted to, I couldn't-short of heroic measures like coma inducing drugs-just divest myself of it. (At any rate there is nothing I can do *directly*; perhaps there is a sort of regimen that if followed religiously would issue, in the long run, in my no longer accepting belief in God.) But secondly, there seems no reason to think that I have such an obligation. Clearly I am not under an obligation to have evidence for *everything* I believe; that would not be possible. But why, then, suppose that I have an obligation to accept belief in God only if I accept other propositions which serve as evidence for it? This is by no means self-evident or just obvious, and it is extremely hard to see how to find a cogent argument for it.

In any event, I think the evidentialist objector can take a more promising line. He can hold, not that the theist without evidence has violated some epistemic duty-after all, perhaps he can't help himself- but that he is somehow intellectually flawed or disfigured. Consider someone who believes that Venus is smaller than Mercury-not because he has evidence, but because he read it in a comic book and always believes whatever he reads in comic books-or consider someone who holds that belief on the basis of an outrageously bad argument. Perhaps there is no obligation he has failed to meet; nevertheless his intellectual condition is defective in some way. He displays a sort of deficiency, a flaw, an intellectual dysfunction of some sort.

Perhaps he is like someone who has an astigmatism, or is unduly clumsy, or suffers from arthritis. And perhaps the evidentialist objection is to be construed, not as the claim that the theist without evidence has violated some intellectual obligations, but that he suffers from a certain sort of intellectual deficiency. The theist without evidence, we might say, is an intellectual gimp.

Alternatively but similarly, the idea might be that the theist without evidence is under a sort of illusion, a kind of pervasive illusion afflicting the great bulk of mankind over the great bulk of the time thus far allotted to it. Thus Freud saw religious belief as "illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most insistent wishes of mankind." [4] He sees theistic belief as a matter of wish-fulfillment. Men are paralyzed by and appalled at the spectacle of the overwhelming, impersonal forces that control our destiny, but mindlessly take no notice, no account of us and our needs and desires; they therefore invent a heavenly father of cosmic proportions, who exceeds our earthly fathers in goodness and love as much as in power. Religion, says Freud, is the "universal obsessional neurosis of humanity", and it is destined to disappear when human beings learn to face reality as it is, resisting the tendency to edit it to suit our fancies.

A similar sentiment is offered by Karl Marx:

Religion . . . is the self-consciousness and the self-feeling of the man who has either not yet found himself, or else (having found himself) has lost himself once more. But man is not an abstract being . . . Man is the world of men, the State, society. This State, this society, produce religion, produce a perverted world consciousness, because they are a perverted world . . . Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feelings of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of unspiritual conditions. It is the opium of the people.

The people cannot be really happy until it has been deprived of illusory happiness by the abolition of religion. The demand that the people should shake itself free of illusion as to its own condition is the demand that it should abandon a condition which needs illusion.[5]

Note that Marx speaks here of a *perverted* world consciousness produced by a perverted world. This is a perversion from a correct, or right, or natural condition, brought about somehow by an unhealthy and perverted social order. From the Marx-Freud point of view, the theist is subject to a sort of cognitive dysfunction, a certain lack of cognitive and emotional health. We could put this as follows: the theist believes as he does only because of the power of this illusion, this perverted neurotic condition. He is insane, in the etymological sense of that term; he is unhealthy. His cognitive equipment, we might say, isn't working properly; it isn't functioning as it ought to. If his cognitive equipment were working properly, working the way it ought to work, he wouldn't be under the spell of this illusion. He would instead face the world and our place in it with the clear-eyed apprehension that we are alone in it, and that any comfort and help we get will have to be our own devising. There is no Father in heaven to turn to, and no prospect of anything, after death, but dissolution. ("When we die, we rot," says Michael Scriven, in one of his more memorable lines.)

Now of course the theist is likely to display less than overwhelming enthusiasm about the idea that he is suffering from a cognitive deficiency, is under a sort of widespread illusion endemic to the human condition. It is at most a liberal theologian or two, intent on novelty and eager to concede as much as possible to contemporary secularity, who would embrace such an idea. The theist doesn't see himself as suffering from cognitive deficiency. As a matter of fact, he may be inclined to see the shoe as on the other foot; he may be inclined to think of the *atheist* as the person who is suffering, in this way, from some illusion, from some noetic defect, from an unhappy, unfortunate, and unnatural condition with deplorable noetic consequences. He will see the atheist as somehow the victim of **sin** in the world- his own sin or the sin of others. According to the book of *Romans*, unbelief is a result of sin; it originates in an effort to "suppress the truth in unrighteousness." According to John Calvin, God has created us with a *nisus* or tendency to see His hand in the world around us; a "sense of deity," he says, "is inscribed in the hearts of all." He goes on:

Indeed, the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that his conviction, namely, that there is some God, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow. . . . From this we conclude that it is not a doctrine that must first be learned in school, but one of which each of us is master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no man to forget.[6]

Were it not for the existence of sin in the world, says Calvin, human beings would believe in God to the same degree and with the same natural spontaneity displayed in our belief in the existence of other persons, or an external world, or the past. This is the *natural* human condition; it is because of our presently unnatural sinful condition that many of us find belief in God difficult or absurd. The fact is, Calvin thinks, one who does not believe in God is in an epistemically defective position—rather like someone who does not believe that his wife exists, or thinks that she is a cleverly constructed robot that has no thoughts, feelings, or consciousness. Thus the believer reverses Freud and Marx, claiming that what they see as sickness is really health and what they see as health is really sickness.

Obviously enough, the dispute here is ultimately ontological, or theological, or metaphysical; here we see the ontological and ultimately religious roots of epistemological discussions of rationality. What you take to be rational, at least in the sense in question, depends upon your metaphysical and religious stance. It depends upon your philosophical anthropology. Your view as to what sort of creature a human being is will determine, in whole or in part, your views as to what is rational or irrational for human beings to believe; this view will determine what you take to be natural, or normal, or healthy, with respect to belief. So the dispute as to who is rational and who is irrational here can't be settled just by attending to epistemological considerations; it is fundamentally not an epistemological dispute, but an ontological or theological dispute. How can we tell what it is healthy for human beings to believe unless we know or have some idea about what sort of creature a human being is? If you think he is created by God in the image of God, and created with a natural tendency to see God's hand in the world about us, a natural tendency to recognize that he has been created and is beholden to his creator, owing his worship and allegiance, then of course you will not think of belief in God as a manifestation of wishful thinking or as any kind of defect at all. It is then much more like sense perception or memory, though in some ways much more important. On the other hand, if you think of a human being as the product of blind evolutionary forces, if you think there is no God and that human beings are part of a godless universe, then you will be inclined to accept a view according to which belief in God is a sort of disease or dysfunction, due perhaps, to a sort of softening of the brain.

So the dispute as to who is healthy and who diseased has ontological or theological roots, and is finally to be settled, if at all at that level. And here I would like to present a consideration that, I think tells in favor of the theistic way of looking at the matter. As I have been representing that matter, theist and atheist alike speak of a sort of dysfunction, of cognitive faculties or cognitive equipment not working properly, of their not working as they ought to. But how are we to understand that? What is it for something to work properly? Isn't there something deeply problematic about the idea of *proper functioning*? What is it for my cognitive faculties to be working properly? What is it for a natural organism—a tree, for example—to be in good working order, to be functioning properly? Isn't *working properly* relative to our aims and interests? A cow is functioning properly when she gives milk; a garden patch is as it ought to be when it displays a luxuriant preponderance of the sorts of vegetation we propose to promote. But then it seems patent that what constitutes proper functioning depends upon our aims and interests. So far as nature herself goes, isn't a fish decomposing in a hill of corn functioning just as properly, just as excellently, as one happily swimming about chasing minnows? But then what could be meant by speaking of "proper functioning" with respect to our cognitive faculties? A chunk of reality—an organism, a part of an organism, an ecosystem, a garden patch—"functions properly" only with respect to a sort of grid we impose on nature—a grid that incorporates our aims and desires.

But from a theistic point of view, the idea of proper functioning, as applied to us and our cognitive equipment, is not more problematic than, say, that of a Boeing 747's working properly. Something we have constructed—a heating system, a rope, a linear accelerator—is functioning properly when it is functioning in the way it was designed to function. My car works properly if it works the way it was designed to work.

My refrigerator is working properly if it refrigerates, if it does what a refrigerator is designed to do. This, I think, is the root idea of working properly. But according to theism, human beings, like ropes and linear accelerators, have been designed; they have been created and designed by God. Thus, he has an easy answer to the relevant set of questions: What is proper functioning? What is it for my cognitive faculties to be working properly? What is cognitive dysfunction? What is it to function naturally? My cognitive faculties are functioning naturally, when they are functioning in the way God designed them to function.

On the other hand, if the atheological evidentialist objector claims that the theist without evidence is irrational, and if he goes on to construe irrationality in terms of defect or dysfunction, then he owes us an account of this notion. Why does he take it that the theist is somehow dysfunctional, at least in this area of his life? More importantly, how does he conceive dysfunction? How does he see dysfunction and its opposite? How does he explain the idea of an organism's working properly, or of some organic system or part of an organism's thus working? What account does he give of it? Presumably he can't see the proper functioning of my noetic equipment as its functioning in the way it was designed to function; so how can he put it?

Two possibilities leap to mind. First, he may be thinking of proper functioning as *functioning in a way that helps us attain our ends*. In this way, he may say, we think of our bodies as functioning properly, as being healthy, when they function in the way we want them to, when they function in such a way as to enable us to do the sorts of things we want to do. But of course this will not be a promising line to take in the present context; for while perhaps the atheological *objector* would prefer to see our cognitive faculties function in such a way as not to produce belief in God in us, the same cannot be said, naturally enough, for the theist. Taken this way the atheological evidentialist's objection comes to little more than the suggestion that the atheologian would prefer it if people did not believe in God without evidence. That would be an autobiographical remark on his part, having the interest such remarks usually have in philosophical contexts.

A second possibility: proper functioning and allied notions are to be explained in terms of aptness for promoting survival, either at an individual or species level. There isn't time to say much about this here; but it is at least and immediately evident that the atheological objector would then owe us an argument for the conclusion that belief in God is indeed less likely to contribute to our individual survival, or the survival of our species than is atheism or agnosticism. But how could such an argument go? Surely the prospects for a non-question begging argument of this sort are bleak indeed. For if theism-Christian theism, for example-is true, then it seems wholly implausible to think that widespread atheism, for example, would be more likely to contribute to the survival of our race than widespread theism.

By way of conclusion: a natural way to understand such notions as rationality and irrationality is in terms of the proper functioning of the relevant cognitive equipment. Seen from this perspective, the question whether it is rational to believe in God without the evidential support of other propositions is really a metaphysical or theological dispute. The theist has an easy time explaining the notion of our cognitive equipment's functioning properly: our cognitive equipment functions properly when it functions in the way God designed it to function. The atheist evidential objector, however, owes us an account of this notion. What does he mean when he complains that the theist without evidence displays a cognitive defect of some sort? How does he understand the notion of cognitive malfunction?

NOTES

[1]W.K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1879), p. 183.

[2]Ibid, p. 184.

[3]Ibid, p. 186.

[4]Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 30.

[5]K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3: *Introduction to a Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right*, by Karl Marx (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975).

[6]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.3 (p. 43- 44).