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Is Belief A Choice?

If God exists, what does he think of the atheist? Does he plan to punish him or her for not believing in him? Most theists would likely agree that God would be merciful to those people who have never had an opportunity to learn about God or about the “correct” or “true” god. But there are many who have been taught about God and maybe even had a spiritual experience earlier in life who have nonetheless rejected religion and no longer believe in God.

Many believers, when confronting atheists, argue that belief is a choice, that a person can choose to believe whatever he or she wants. They might then conclude that the atheist who apparently chose not to believe in God has made a mistake or sinned. This view, the view that belief is entirely chosen, is sometimes called voluntarism. Voluntarism is often intermixed with religious beliefs because a believer would praise a person who has chosen to believe in God, even if evidence seems to point to the contrary.

But this doesn't seem very philosophical. A philosopher would demand support for any claim, premises for any conclusion. This view is called evidentialism and holds that religious beliefs must be founded on rational grounds, or evidence. Evidentialism itself does not take a position on whether it is rational to believe in god or not but the theory would demand that whatever a person believes in regards to religion needs to be founded on rational reasons. These reasons can include personal experience, logical arguments, or the testimony of others.

Personally, I favor involuntarism, which is the view that our beliefs are simply a result of being convinced by our current knowledge and biases. This view could become somewhat deterministic but more on that later. Currently I would classify myself as an agnostic atheist because I don't believe in God but I think that his existence is possible, if not plausible. I used to believe entirely in God and felt that my belief was quite justified. But the more I studied and thought about the assumptions behind my beliefs, the more I realized that I didn't actually believe them but was, in a way, trying to convince myself that I did.

William Hasker gives an example of an intellectually sophisticated theist who is aware of the plurality of contradicting religious doctrines found on Earth. He sums up the matter quite nicely: "This does not, I think, mean that the theist ought to *give up* her beliefs; they are, after all, *her* beliefs, grounded in part in her own experience, and she should give them up only if, after thorough reflection, they seem insufficiently likely to be true" (Peterson 264). I feel that this is what has happened to me; after much study and reflection, it seems much more likely to me that my former religious beliefs are false than that they are accurate descriptions of reality. I try to explain to believers that I do not in fact "choose" not to believe in God. Instead, atheism is the only possible position I can have given my present state of knowledge. I can no more "choose" to just believe in the existence of a god than I can "choose" to just believe that the computer on my desk doesn't exist.

Though I personally no longer believe, I would never claim that belief in God is completely absurd or irrational. Dr. Robert Pargetter in his article "Experience, Proper Basicity, and Belief in God" argues that people can use the experiences of others as

evidence for belief: “The rationality of those who do not share these experiences in accepting such beliefs on the basis of testimony, will similarly depend on the holistic evaluation for rationality of their resulting systems of beliefs” (260). Therefore, believers aren’t required to have undeniable proof of God’s existence in order to be justified in believing in him or it. But Pargetter (and other evidentialists) still believes that all believers need to have a holistic system of beliefs. This means that a believer is not justified in believing in God if he or she is first relying entirely on the experiences of others *and* if his or her worldview is scattered and incoherent. Evidentialists leave no room for a fideism, which requires no rational grounds for belief.

Hope and belief are not the same thing. We could assume that I *hope* that Aslan, a character from C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*, is a real creature, that he exists in reality, and that he can indeed do the things that Lewis’s works claim he can. We are not hoping that Aslan as a *metaphor* for Christ exists but that the actual speaking lion is real. That would be extremely helpful to me because I think Aslan could and probably would help me through a lot of my problems. So can I simply choose to believe in him? Some say that I could. The evidentialist would have to ask, “How?” I could base my life around that belief and I could tell myself again and again that I believe he is real but I think that deep down I could never be convinced that Aslan exists in reality without substantial evidence. Deep down I would know that he is just a fictional character. I cannot choose to believe or be convinced of *any* premise.

And so it is with religious matters. I cannot believe in God simply because I hope that God is real and that he loves me. If my studies, experiences, and biases don’t currently convince me of his existence then what am I to do besides disbelieve? What

other choice do I have? But Alvin Plantinga would likely warn me about using my Aslan example too eagerly. In his article entitled “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology” he cites a common objection to a believer: “If belief in God is properly basic, why can’t just any belief be properly basic? What about voodoo or astrology? What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween?? (252). He goes on to rebut against this objection by saying that properly basic beliefs must be self-evident to those who hold them. Many people would argue that God’s existence is self-evident but that Aslan’s is not.

Belief in God is not a choice but a result of personal experience, evidence, and deep reflection. But this approach to belief does not rule out either side of the argument. William James, who believed that belief is indeed a choice,” makes a call for respect that I wish to echo: “We ought...to respect on another’s mental freedom: then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless” (110). Believers and nonbelievers alike need to recognize that one can rationally, maturely, and responsibly go either way on the God question.

Works Cited

Peterson, Michael; Hasker, William; Reichenback, Bruce; Basinger, David. *Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford University Press, New York. 2010. Print.