

Faithless atheism

The Cranky Professor

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One response to the charge that religious belief is irrational or wishful is that we all live with faith, those without religion as much as those with it. We all live faithful lives because even thinking itself requires a leap of faith.

If this response is sound, religious people cannot be faulted for being overly credulous or for believing according to their desires, at least not as a group or any more than others. Indeed, those who claim to be guided in their beliefs by reason alone are less reasonable than the faithful, for they lack self-awareness.

So while religious people put their faith in God, others put their faith in science or reason, or in goodness or right, or in democracy, tradition, history, or themselves. If one is to attack religious faith, then, it can only be on the grounds that other faiths are superior. It cannot be on the grounds that non-religious ways of life are more reasonable because less superstitious.

Let us consider the line of reasoning supposed to show that no one can live or, at least, live meaningfully without a faith of some sort or other.

By and large, when we are warranted in believing one proposition, it is because we already believe a set of other propositions. If I'm warranted in believing that I'm hearing Etienne's voice from the next room, that's because I believe that I have heard Etienne's voice in the past, that the sound I'm hearing now is like the sound I heard in the past, that it's not impossible that Etienne is presently in the next room, that it's unlikely I'm hearing someone imitating Etienne, and on and on. If someone were to ask me what evidence I have that I'm hearing Etienne's voice, I'd cite these further beliefs.

Of course, these further beliefs confer warrant on the target belief only if they themselves are beliefs I'm warranted in holding. The trouble is, now we're launched on an infinite regress. Any belief I hold reasonably, I hold on the basis of at least one other belief I hold reasonably. But I don't hold that supporting belief reasonably unless I hold its own supporting belief reasonably. And I don't hold its own supporting belief reasonably unless I also hold a prior supporting belief reasonably. And so on.

Faith is necessary to stop the regress, or so goes the argument that we all believe something on faith. Eventually we just say "this is what I believe, and I simply believe it; I have no further grounds to warrant my belief."

Here are some propositions we need to believe if we are to investigate the world scientifically, or at least so say the faithful: How things look when I'm looking at them directly is pretty well how they are. Nature is uniform, such that I may expect similar results to follow

from similar circumstances. The properties of objects do not change except as the effect of a cause.

The faithful add that none of these propositions can itself be grounded on evidence. The scientist must either hold these propositions true on faith, or appeal to a deeper but non-scientific proposition, such as that God treats His creation lovingly and so wouldn't deceive us, to warrant her belief.

The atheist might note here that at least he, the atheist, is not as profligate in faith as the believer. After all, the atheist stops at nature's regularity and the scientist's ability to understand that regularity while the believer goes on to proclaim God's goodness. (The atheist might also note that though he believes here and there without reason, he doesn't follow the faithful in believing against reason.)

Of course, along with believing in the orderliness of nature, the atheist probably also believes in freedom, equality, and democracy, that people deserve respectful treatment, that we have our dignity, that love is better than hate, maybe even that truth will beat falsity in any fair contest, and that's just the start of it. After admitting to a dozen articles of faith, the atheist would be churlish to insist on keeping score.

Rather than concede the point that even the scientist is a person of faith, the atheist would do better to dispute the central claim that the scientist needs to believe any of the propositions the faithful have assigned her. She might believe that nature is orderly and that inductive reasoning is justificatory reasoning, but she doesn't need to. Her engagement with the world as a scientist doesn't require her to believe these things or anything else. If it doesn't require her to believe them, it doesn't require her to believe them on faith.

It's enough for her that they are hypotheses or guiding principles. She can have as her commitment to look for the causes of natural phenomena in other natural phenomena alone without believing that nothing happens in nature except that something else happened in nature. If she entertains the thought of an orderly nature, she can entertain it merely as an hypothesis, not something to which she must believe.

To live without faith might not be to live entirely without unwarranted beliefs, but it is to live cognizant that one's beliefs, one's understanding of things, is always provisional, one's explanations invariably tentative. A faithless atheist would carry on without the assurances that faith provides that nature is orderly and that her efforts to get things right could well succeed.

The charge the faithless atheist makes against religion, then, isn't that religious faith is tantamount to credulity or wishful believing. It is, rather, that faith is dogmatic, that it seeks certainty and pretends to have found it. Of course, the faithless atheist's charge, if it applies to the faithful believer, applies equally to the faithful atheist.