

The Egotism of Atheism



Disbelief in God Rests on Flimsy

Assumptions

A while ago, I read two books high on Amazon's psychology reading list: *The Ego Trick* by Dr. Julian Baggini and *The Belief Instinct* by Dr. Jesse Bering. After reading them, I sent letters to both authors, hoping to engage them further on various topics. I got only a brief response from Dr. Baggini and never heard back from Dr. Bering. Each book was well-researched and thought-provoking; they provided excellent insights and points of discussion about how our brains function, specifically around the ideas of the "self" and "theory of mind." Both were written by self-professed atheists and both possessed a fatal flaw: In the authors' zest to promote psychological theory, their books became attempts to offer proof against the existence of God and our immaterial souls. This was a disappointing end to a set of hypotheses that held significant promise for our understanding of humanity.

I work in a field where many professionals share these authors' atheistic, or at least agnostic, beliefs. Their views are expressed in various ways. But the more I've read about and understood the perspective of atheists, I've found three themes that repeatedly underlie almost all explanations of nonbelief. Simply put, atheists think that belief in God is not 1) logical or understandable, 2) scientifically verifiable or 3) emotionally reasonable. Over and over, those who deny the existence of the Divine come back to these three "arguments."

When a spiritual matter fails to meet one of these criteria, the atheist assumes that God cannot exist. This supposes, of course, that God must be explainable — a view in direct opposition to the views of Christianity and other religions, which hold that many mysteries — the Trinity, for example — exist beyond our understanding. But in our current culture, where narcissism runs rampant, it seems that the idea of a "mystery" is unacceptable and, therefore, implausible. Some atheists say, for example, that the suffering of innocents proves that there is no God. The error is understandable, especially considering the suffering of young children who are living in inhumane conditions.

Others claim that the scientific discovery of a neuronal mechanism for faith-like experiences attests that God is a figment of our imagination. The new scientific findings are intriguing, but when questions become assumptions, and the assumptions become accepted modes of atheists' reasoning, we have to ask if egos are getting in the way.

Psychology does have something to say about these three suppositions of atheism. With regard to the idea that God is neither logical nor understandable, we can cite the well-known principle called the Illusion of Control. We all like to believe that our surroundings are predictable and controllable. But in actuality, this is often not true, especially when realities are too complex and too vast to understand. When atheists attempt to shrink a divine existence into concrete, logical terms, it supports the illusion that our logic is in control.

As to the scientific "invalidation" of God, we again find that our own psychological realities come into play. The Confirmation Bias convinces us that our opinions are the result of years of polished research and observation. In reality, mountains of psychological research find otherwise. Our opinions are often the result of paying attention to what we believe, and ignoring information that challenges what we do not. When scientific ideas such as evolution or theory of mind are used as a proof against God, it seems to be done in the spirit of confirming a bias in what we "know" and "believe," not in creating a greater openness toward what we may not be able to prove scientifically.

And lastly, when it comes to the understandable difficulty of reconciling a beneficent God with emotional distress, hardship and horror, psychology again offers a unique viewpoint. In the world of cognitive-behavioral therapy, which focuses on reducing irrational beliefs (cognitive distortions), there is one belief with which we all struggle from time to time. It's called Emotional Reasoning. It's the idea that what I feel must be true. If I feel stupid, I must be stupid. If I feel alone, I must be alone. If I feel that God does not exist, then he must not exist. It's interesting that many of our greatest saints suffered from this sense of doubt and desolation at a certain point in their lives.

But moving beyond psychological theory, a few additional points are worth noting. If one, just one, Eucharistic miracle is authentic, then atheism fails. If just one saint lies uncorrupted, then atheism fails. And a common, but no less valid and unanswerable, proof for God's existence is this: Throughout history, stunning objects of beauty have been created by many thousands of individuals — paintings, symphonies, sculptures, cathedrals, monuments, and inventions, to name only a few categories. No one has ever questioned that each of these creations, were in fact created, by a creator or creators. We all can agree that the Great Wall of China and Nôtre Dame de Paris didn't occur through an accident of nature.

So, as we look at our world, and admire the genius of the human body and the many stunning landscapes that dot our earth, it seems very hard to deny that a creator is responsible, no matter what theory one chooses, whether evolution, theory of mind or something else. It is also important to note that while science and logic can attempt to explain the mechanisms of any human creator, both repeatedly fall short of being able to recreate the genius responsible for the mechanisms. Try explaining how a human can run 100 miles in half a day. Science and logic have tried, and failed. Try to explain how the universe exists and operates. Science and logic have tried, and failed. Try explaining how a one-celled human being in the womb is one day able to speak, and run, and learn, and lead, and love, and live on in the hearts and souls of millions. And yet we have the beloved Teresa of Calcutta, John Paul II, Padre Pio, Thérèse of Lisieux, Patrick, John of God, Ignatius, Dominic, Francis, Clare, Catherine of Siena, Joseph, Peter, Paul and thousands more. Science and logic fall woefully short.

In essence, even our brilliant worldly realities defy the law of logic, science, and emotion in many ways. This being so, it seems rather strange that we wouldn't assume that a divine Creator was responsible. In the end, it isn't about having doubts. We all have doubts, and in my weakest moments, I sometimes struggle to believe the epic story of Christianity. It appears so much more remarkable than any fictional story could be. But maybe the greatest Ego Trick is the one that an ego plays in believing it knows what is true.

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