

PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF NATURALIZING RELIGION

MICHAEL POLYARD

University of Tampa

Abstract. This paper deals with Daniel Dennett's argument regarding the nature of belief in contrast to belief in belief. The idea that the value of the first order belief in the existence of a precept is entirely irrelevant because it is indistinguishable from the second-order belief; that the belief in something is a good thing. That is to say it doesn't matter if I believe something inasmuch as if I believe that the belief is a good thing (i.e.: beneficial to the individual, etc). Dennett's approach particularly regards an analysis of religion from this point, and suggests that it is entirely impossible to determine if an individual believes in God, or simply believes that the belief in God is a good thing. More importantly, Dennett argues that the individual themselves cannot make this distinction.

THE CLAIM

The nature of belief has been an area of study that has historically had great influence in the philosophical field. However, in *Breaking the Spell*, Daniel Dennett proposes a new, interesting way of looking at religious belief. Dennett's proposition is that while the first-order belief of most monotheistic religions is that God exists, a second-order belief is necessary for religions develop and to propagate successfully. The second-order belief is that the belief that God exists is a good thing (i.e.: that the belief that God exists is beneficial to individuals who believe it). Dennett refers to this second-order claim as *belief in belief*, and he claims that the truth is independent of the validity or truthfulness of the first-order claim. Almost all individuals who practice in monotheistic religions fervently claim, that as devout and pious people, they truly believe in God. That is to say again, that they hold to the first order belief that God exists. Dennett challenges this claim, arguing that it is impossible from an external (or third-person)

perspective to determine whether an individual actually believes in God or instead believe only that the belief in God is a good thing. More importantly, Dennett also claims that it is impossible for an individual to evaluate from a reflective (or first-person) perspective whether or not she herself/he himself actually believes that God exists. The claim that an individual cannot make this first-personal judgment is important not only because the foundation of these religions rests upon the existence of God, but also because, if an individual cannot determine himself/herself if he/she truly holds to a belief, it calls into question at least some of what is known about epistemology. While I will intermittently address the broad implications of this point in what follows, this paper will focus on the philosophical and religious implications of belief in belief.

It can be assumed, by inference, that Dennett is sympathetic with a pragmatist view of belief which suggests that beliefs necessitate a behavioral consequence. For the pragmatist, the truth value of a belief is secondary to the degree to which the belief is useful. Given this, even false beliefs can be valuable (evolutionarily speaking) provided that they result in a behavioral change that benefits the organism. The evolutionary aspect is important to the pragmatist, because the pragmatist is concerned with the genetic implications of a belief, and provided that a belief serves an evolutionary function (allows organisms to survive to reproduce), it is considered to be *truthful*. From this perspective, the usefulness of a belief is contingent upon a behavioral consequence which then benefits the individual who holds the belief. These displays of behavior actively demonstrate the individual's commitment to the belief, and the absence of any such demonstration could indicate that the individual does not really believe what they claim. To be succinct, if an individual holds to a belief, there will be a behavioral change resultant from (or constituent of) the belief, and if that behavioral change provides an evolutionarily beneficial change in behavior (causes the individual to procreate, keeps the individual alive, etc.) the belief is useful and therefore pragmatically valuable/truthful. Ultimately, the omission of a behavioral change could stand to indicate that an individual does not really believe their belief, or even believe that belief is a good thing. What this means is that while an individual might not believe belief x , because the belief x is a good thing (useful to the organism who believes it), the omission of a behavioral consequence could indicate (from a pragmatic perspective) that the individual believes that their belief x is, in fact, not useful.

Dennett remarks that often the type of behavioral display that is prominent in religion is actually paying "lip service" to the religious claims in

hope both of convincing other individuals that they themselves truly hold to their beliefs, and in propagating the religion (or at least the tenets of the religion) to other individuals (Dennett, 2006). Paying lip service, as it were, does not directly indicate that an individual truly believes the beliefs they are espousing, but instead, indicates only that the individual may only believe that the espoused belief is good to hold.

Consider now this approach from a memetic perspective. The memetic perspective claims that there is a unit of cultural transmission similar to the gene which is replicated through imitation and transmits both linearly down a hereditary line and laterally across cultures. From this perspective, the individual who engages in the behavioral display is the vessel for the religious memplex (a complex of memes) which has taken up residency in the individual's brain, and the display serves a memetic advantage. That is, the display or religiously supportive behavior serves to help the memes supportive of religion to get themselves copied in the brains of other individuals, who will then continue to propagate the same memes linearly (down a hereditary line, e.g. to children) and laterally (across cultures e.g. missionaries). Memes are important to incorporate in this argument, because they provide the behavior by which ideas or cultural replicates (in this case, replicates for religion) get transmitted. This perspective also allows the transmission to disregard the value to biological fitness, their truth value, or the degree to which an individual actually holds to a belief. Through a memetic exposition, one could argue that believing in religious tenets is a matter of the successful transmission of memes for religion, and that an individual need not necessarily really believe the religious replicates to transmit them into other meme-accepting brains. Dennett would also argue that if the replicates can be transmitted without true belief, then the individual is simply acting for the benefit of the memes being transmitted (as a slave to the memes). More importantly, the argument would include that the individual is simply seeking to convince other meme-accepting brains that these memes are beneficial and good to acquire as demonstrated by the individual transmitting the memes they do not truly believe in (Dennett, 2006).

At this point, Dennett's claims are as follows: a. an individual cannot determine if they believe a belief or if they believe that the belief is a good thing, b. the division of doxastic labor (the reliance upon designated "authorities" for the interpretation and understanding of dogma) eliminates the necessary understanding of a belief by conferring to experts, c. mimetically, beliefs need not be believed or understood to be transmitted, d. pragmatically, a belief can be value-laden by its usefulness regardless of

its truth value. In contrast to what Dennett argues about religion, Dennett claims that other sorts of belief have a definitive result. Take, for example, the case of mathematics... While we rely upon teachers to delineate the mathematical equations we are taught in school (a division of doxastic labor), we can demonstrate, reason, and replicate the results of equations such as $2+2=4$. We *can* know intrinsically and first-personally that the result of $2+2$ will always equal 4 and if we are ever uncertain about such a prospect, we can test it and evaluate the result. The same can be said in the case of gravity. We can reason through formulas developed by Isaac Newton that an object released without suspension from a height will fall to the ground at a given rate of 3.8 m/s/s and while we rely upon physicists to routinely test, evaluate, and retest this information, the laws of gravity are time tested, and easily proven. One can also imagine that if there were some sort of counter-example or new evidence that could be presented against the case of gravity, it could reliably be evaluated and interpreted by experts by virtue of their track-record in providing support for the law. Also, one can imagine that since this doctrine has come directly from a human source whose existence could never be questioned, at one point, one could've conferred upon Newton himself to explain his reasoning.

Dennett argues that in religion there is a division of doxastic labor in which individuals, who are not holding positions of authority, rely on supposed "experts" to delineate and distribute the fundamentals of dogmatic belief and to provide accurate and truthful information. For Dennett, this division of doxastic labor (which is not exclusive to religion as he notes the same type of reliance on authorities in science) creates a social hierarchy in which the lay people who are seeking to believe a certain dogma (read belief) cannot truly believe the dogmas unless they are capable of understanding that which they desire to believe, and so dispatch the understanding of the dogma to the experts who then understand (read interpret) the dogma for the lay people so that they can go on believing the dogma without first-personally understanding it (Dennett, 2006). The problem becomes apparent in that there is an overreliance on authorities, and that in this case, if Dennett's claim about belief in belief is true, then these purported "authorities" cannot themselves determine if they actually hold the beliefs they claim (and are responsible to interpret), and are mistakenly propagating this information as authoritative and accurate. This claim is significant because it holds the "authorities" to the same rules as the lay person insofar as their responsibility to understand and convey dogma to establish accurate beliefs. What this means is that the authorities are limited only to an interpretation of dogma (as opposed to true understanding) and therefore

they cannot be said truly to understand the dogma they are responsible to understand and convey to the individual believers. For example, religious belief is reliant upon the understanding of doctrine and dogma from God in the Bible. The believers cannot adequately (so the authorities say) interpret and understand the Bible without authoritative assistance. The authorities are also believers, who just happen to be charged with providing that understanding. As they are believers, like the lay person, they too cannot adequately reflect upon the dogma to result in a truly held belief without assistance from superior authorities, and so on ad infinitum. The reason for this is that according to Dennett, the division of doxastic labor is an infinitesimal reliance upon authorities. If the lay person relies upon their appointed experts, the experts then have to confer to experts that they have appointed (perhaps elders, superior members of their order, experts with more longevity, the Pope) to interpret and delineate the dogma, who then in turn, have to confer to yet superior experts. The final authority over the dogma would be God himself and as the dogma states that God is infinitely unknowable, the final authority is removed from providing the actual interpretation and understanding of the dogma for the individual believers (lay-person or authority), and therefore even the purported authorities cannot dispatch adequate understanding to the lay-person believers. The ultimate result is that the interpretation of dogma from God, must be conferred to God. Due to this logical fallacy, there can be no real belief in God unless one can receive direct interpretation and understanding from the man himself, and as he is infinitely unknowable (as per his own doctrine) true belief in God can never be held.

An objector to Dennett's claim that even on a reflective personal level, an individual cannot determine if she/he believes in God or exclusively believes in belief in god, can pursue a couple of courses of action. First, the individual may propose a counter example to demonstrate that there is an act that an individual may engage that adequately can demonstrate that an individual in fact holds to the first order belief that they believe in God. The alternative to this option is to challenge the pragmatist assumption that true belief requires a behavioral manifestation. Due to the nature of this discussion, the scope of this treatment will handle only the first option, the proposition of a counter-example that demonstrates that an individual can, in fact, know that they believe in God.

OBJECTION 1

An objector taking this approach would begin by first presenting a hypothetical scenario in which there was a monotheistic religion isolated to at least some degree from the external world. Take an example of a monastery of monks who practice monotheistic religion, and do so isolated largely from society either by geography or choice. The tenets of this religion include sacrifices to God to ensure a bountiful harvest season, and the ritual spilling of blood of the participants by lashing themselves. This type of behavior is seen in many indigenous tribes of South America and Indochina, and is also arguably practiced by the members of the Roman Catholic religious sect, Opus Dei. An individual monk who claims to believe in God and is particularly devout and pious, attends his monastic duties fervently and in the privacy of his domicile expends a great deal of time and energy on this particularly costly religion, in solitary reflective meditation. The tenets of this faith also require great personal sacrifice, and are particularly detrimental to this monk, yet he continues to lash himself dutifully on the back with a flail of leather straps until the skin is tender and blood is drawn. This monk additionally wears a cilice, a ritualistic device that resembles a small belt of intertwined chain links with barbed ends, which is then worn around the upper thigh or upper arm to distract the devout from any notions of pleasure. Traditionally, this practice (usually found in extremist sects of Roman Catholicism such as Opus Dei; again, arguably) serves the purpose of restraining an individual from any acts or moments of pleasure so as to better serve, perceive, and understand God.

The example as laid out, an objector might argue, demonstrates the monk's true belief in God from an individual and reflective perspective. The monk not only claims to believe in God, he knows he believes in God. To begin with, the monk would not engage in a religion which requires such a great cost in time and energy and personal deprivation if he did not truly believe their claim. Secondly, the monk would not engage in such physically debilitating practices such as lashings or the wearing of a cilice unless the individual was truly devout in their beliefs.

Dennett might respond that if a monk were so devout in believing that his beliefs are a good thing, regardless of the beliefs he is trying to demonstrate he truly holds, he would engage in whatever dogma (in this case, lashing and the cilice) that was composite of the belief. He might also argue that those behaviors are individual beliefs in themselves (the self-mutilation is a good and pious thing to do). In this case, the monk only believes that it is a good thing to be closer to, or better serve God and that

these behaviors are said to have that result. Additionally, it can be argued that because these behaviors are being engaged in a public forum, that the behavior is being used to convince other individuals of the monk's conviction in his beliefs, or to simply propagate the behaviors and coinciding beliefs. This is important, because it appears that a belief is truly held only if other individuals can objectively state that an individual engages in behavior which supports the belief. In this case, the behavior is normatively assessed to determine if the individual believes in the belief. In this case, the audience of third-personally objective spectators evaluates the behavior in which the individual is engaging in contrast to the behaviors normally (read typically) associated with that belief. If the behavior seems to coincide with most of the behaviors traditionally or typically associated with the belief, the individual is evaluated to truly hold to their belief to at least a moderate degree. Conversely if the behavior does not coincide with the behaviors typically associated with the belief, then there are two alternative results. First, if the behavior is more consistent (as objectively and normatively evaluated by the audience) with behaviors that show that the individual does not hold to the belief, the individual is branded a heretic, or much less punitively, said to either not believe or not understand the belief. This is relevant to the argument being presented because it supports the necessity to engage in behavioral practices that support a belief and to do so in a public forum. Secondly, the audience determines that the individual's behaviors are consistent with some of the behaviors associated with, or the basic principles of the belief, but the behaviors themselves are so extreme (and as in the case of the monk, self-detrimental) that the individual is either said to have an enlightened understanding of the belief, or that because of the severity of the behavior, the individual is said to hold to the belief to a high degree. The objector presents a solution by isolating the monastic order from society, and further isolating the individual believers into their own private domiciles in which they engage these practices. In this case, without an audience to evaluate the individual, the individual may believe that they are now engaging in these behaviors for the purpose of the belief itself. What this means is that because the behaviors are no longer being done for the purpose of convincing an audience that the monk is not a heretic and because the behavior is not being passed to any other individuals, the behaviors, despite their detrimental effects on the individual, are now being engaged in for the sake of the beliefs. This might suggest that the monk truly holds to his beliefs. Does the fact that the individual engages these practices in private, behind closed doors, without an audience, not demonstrate the individual's conviction in their belief in God?

THE RESPONSE

Dennett's response would be that while the isolation of the monks from society and from each other does eliminate the audience from the argument, there is still one member of the audience left to convince. Dennett would likely argue that even with this degree of isolation, the believer engages in these activities to convince himself of his convictions, and that if an individual truly held to a belief they claim, they would not need to take such measures as self-conviction. Dennett would likely argue that even though the monk is now isolated from the larger objective audience of other people or contemporaries, the behavior is not being engaged in for the sake of the belief itself, but instead for the sake of convincing the monk engaging in this activity that he truly believes that God exists. Dennett would claim that, whereas in the larger audience, the more severe the behavior the monk engages in, the greater the individual's conviction to the belief, in actuality, the more severe the behavior reflects a greater need for self-conviction. Dennett might also argue that in regards to the arguments posited above, the more severe the behavior, the dumber the monk, seeking to believe an unbelievable belief.

This case presents a problem for the non-naturalist monotheist, in that all evidence for an individual's belief in God could be exclusively evaluated and determined to also provide evidence for the belief in belief. That is to say, all the behaviors engaged in by individuals that would reflect the true commitment to a belief, the behaviors also reflect the true commitment to the belief that the belief is a good thing. In this case, it is impossible to isolate the true belief that God exists from the belief that the belief that God exists is a good thing and there can be no support exclusively for the true belief. What an objector would need to do at this stage is present an example in which all of the evidence supports the belief in God exclusively, and so cannot be rationalized alternatively to be evidence for the second-order belief that the belief in God is a good thing.

OBJECTION 2

At this point, it seems that the objector could assert that the only way to actively demonstrate a true belief in God is to not act. If Dennett's response to the monastic objection is true, then it would seem that any sort of action which is representative of an individual's beliefs would only serve to demonstrate the necessity for the individual to convince themselves of

their beliefs. To truly demonstrate that an individual holds to a belief, then the believer should not engage in any sort of behavior that could be rationalized as self-convincing, and, therefore, the only method by which to prove a conviction in a belief is to not act on that belief. An example can be proposed wherein an individual believer of a faith, such as Christianity, wherein the practitioner believes in the existence of God (the first-order belief) and believes that such a belief is a good thing (the second-order belief), therefore accepting the tenets of the faith. With the restriction to inaction as stipulated, the believer then embarks to live his/her life in a manner consistent with those tenets without any attempt or outwardly expressive demonstration of those beliefs. Ultimately, the argument here is that if a behavioral change makes it impossible to distinguish between true belief and belief in belief, the only solution is to eliminate the behavioral change. Doing so could in fact indicate that an individual truly holds to a belief simply because if the individual does in fact truly believe, he/she need to convince no one, not even himself/herself, that he/she believes.

THE RESPONSE

First, Dennett could challenge from the pragmatist perspective stating that the absence of action by the believer in fact *demonstrates* that the individual does not actually hold to their claims on the principle that a convicted belief requires a behavioral consequence or action. The objection could then be raised, that even inaction is a form of action as if it is a conscious choice, and therefore, is in fact a behavioral consequence. These two objections are important because, from a pragmatist approach, a behavioral change is necessary and that behavior must be beneficial to the organism in the long run in order for the precipitating belief to be considered true. If inaction is considered to be a form of action, then the behavior demanded by the belief is indistinguishable from the behavior of normal people and therefore provides no more evidence for the first order belief than for not holding it at all. To this point, it seems that Dennett would respond that the lack of objective evaluation resulting from the lack of an audience indicates that the individual does not hold to their belief, or that it may indicate that the individual does not wish to provide evidence that he/she believes the belief. The objector would argue that the lack of evidence being provided would indicate a lack of *need* to provide evidence, and therefore a truly held belief, however it seems clear that Dennett would argue that if a belief is truly held, the individual is *responsible* to provide evidence

that he/she does so. He may also challenge that even mental process (i.e.: prayer) in support of religious belief serve as a form of self-persuasion. If this is true, then it would seem that there is no final way to determine whether or not an individual truly believes in God. There is however, an important distinction between being unable to prove something and proving its non-existence. If it can be proven that there is no way to determine that an individual truly believes/does not believe in God (or any belief), it does not indicate that the belief is not/cannot held by the/any individual. What this means simply, is that being unable to prove that something exists does not prove its non-existence, and being unable to prove that something doesn't exist does not prove its existence. Because of the grand scope that belief in God engenders, this is a continuing problem on both sides of the argument, and neither one is willing to make concessions, rightfully so, because there are no proven necessary and sufficient conditions which prove or disprove the existence of God.

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, Dennett has raised a compelling argument against an individual's religious belief in god and perhaps it can/should be said that it will forever be impossible to determine if an individual can truly believe in God or if they are exclusively limited to believing that such a belief is a good thing. Under this case, it would seem that Dennett's argument is unsettling. One reason which could be offered to explain the unsettling nature of this claim is that the same approach of isolating a truly held belief from the belief that it is a good thing can be applied to other fields of study. As discussed, however, in trying to apply the same criticism to the sciences blatantly fails as science is based on empirical evidence that can be tested, improved upon, recalculated, and retested. So it would seem that the dis-ease in this is that if we cannot in fact truly believe in God, what is the purpose of that belief? Other questions arise from this type of exposition as well. Do beliefs serve a biologically adaptive function that aid in the continuation of the species? Are we just slaves to the memes or memplexes that are constituent of beliefs? If we cannot truly believe anything, can anything truly be known?

These questions certainly deserve to be answered and the responsibility of these questions would sit with the epistemologists who combat and wrestle with the nature of knowledge. It would seem however, that Dennett would conclude (at least in regards to religion) that the nature of be-

belief in God is hinged upon one or many logical fallacies (overreliance on authorities, circular reasoning, etc.) and as such, there can be no truly held religious belief and that the belief in God is an indefensible position whose ambiguity arises from the fact that it can neither be proven or disproven. The only thing that can be said in regards to the attempt to disprove such claims as first-person conscious knowledge of belief is that Dennett raises many interesting claims and it seems that there is a greater probability in support of his argument than there is for the religious zealot.