

Atheist confessions

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At one stage in 1993, during the (in)famous religious debate on my employer's Vax NOTES OPEN_FORUM (topic 229 occasionally referred to in the below), I decided it was necessary to let the cat out of the bag and state my metaphysical beliefs clearly and unambiguously.

Having gone public in such a visible manner, I can see no point wasting the effort that had gone into attempting to formulate my position. Readers should bear in mind that the below is not, and never was intended to be a philosophical treatise or an attack on religious belief. I was writing primarily for an audience of thoughtful, though not necessarily well informed believers, some of whom had difficulty conceiving of atheism as anything other than shallow, cynical, or nihilistic. My aim was to show that a non-theistic worldview can be serious, compassionate, and intellectually responsible.

The posts are presented in their original form – conversational, exploratory, and incomplete. They reflect a moment in time, both personally and culturally, while, I believe, remaining relevant. So here they are, just in case (however unlikely) that anybody equally interested in such matters might find them of interest.

Topic 299, 15 of 92 – "Yrth (a.k.a. Duke)" - 8-OCT-1993 13:22
<And here's one I prepared earlier...>

OK folks, run for cover – stop reading *now* or don't complain to me afterwards! Here starts an occasional series of contributions attempting to explain to the masses what atheism is and why it can be a good thing.

First of all, let's be quite clear what atheism is and what it isn't. When I speak of atheism, I do not mean mere agnosticism or materialism (though believers appear to assume automatically that the word cannot mean anything else). Nor do I mean thoughtless "atheism" as practised by many youngsters. Don't give me the "We've all been atheists before becoming Christians", because you almost certainly never were – you just didn't believe in God, which is not the same thing at all. What I *do* mean is atheism arising out of a serious consideration of the subject, rooted in knowledge, thought and experience. Some believers seem to think that such a definition of an atheist is fundamentally self-contradictory – i.e. there can't be any. Well, that's their problem.

Another point that needs making explicitly: I am not foolish enough to pretend that atheism is (or can be) somehow "proven" by science or by experience. We are talking metaphysics here and one has to be remarkably naive (or arrogant) to believe such "extra mundane" issues as the existence or otherwise of God to be resolvable by "mundane" means. As Blaise Pascal concluded centuries ago, there are no good and sufficient reasons either to believe or disbelieve in God – which is as true today as it was then. So, let's be quite clear that atheism is a kind of "faith" - of non-theistic and non-denominational sort.

(Pascal, incidentally, having come to his conclusion adopted the dubious gambit of the sort

Keel had tried on us once. He proclaimed that since there was no proof either way, it was necessary to believe in God. If God did not exist, nothing was lost thereby. If God did exist, all was gained. With all respect to Pascal, this strikes me as intellectually dishonest – quite apart from the obvious lapse in logic, it is an open invitation to treat life as a game played for after-life stakes.)

As should be obvious from the above, atheism should not be confused with rationalism either. Though out of sheer reaction to the contents of the topic 229 I tend to adopt a rabidly rationalist stance (it is not false, just exaggerated), there is nothing to prevent atheists recognising that there are limits to rational understanding, and that there are whole areas where such understanding may suffer irreducible discontinuities. (This probably sounds like pompous verbiage, but I choose my words carefully, so that I can honestly defend my statements if challenged from either side – if you really must know, I am talking about Stewart's and Cohen's "ant country" – see their book "Figments of Reality".) Those who followed the radical decoupling debate in the "Paradigm Shift" topic, may be aware of some of the boundaries to rationality which I draw. There are others, which have not come up yet, but may well do. Be it as it may, my point is that rationalism is not something an atheist automatically subscribes to.

It is my experience that real atheists are generally reluctant to preach their point of view to others. This is partly cultural conditioning – while religious believers are free to proclaim themselves as believers, for an atheist to do the equivalent is somehow felt to be "bad form". I suppose it could be worse. A few centuries back proclaiming oneself an atheist automatically made one a Devil's disciple – not exactly a life enhancing ploy. When the western society got a bit more enlightened, things improved, but even then announcing oneself an atheist severely limited one's prospects in life due to the attached moral stigma – an atheist had to be an a-moral cynic and quite likely a criminal, which attitude sadly still persists amongst many believers. Even within living memory, professing an atheist belief could lead to social ostracism. All in all, a set of precedents which make me smile when at the slightest provocation believers start muttering about persecution, Christians being fed to lions etc... (while at the same time disclaiming any responsibility for burning witches and so on).

However, there is a deeper reason for this reluctance. While I can speak only for myself, I have reasons to believe that atheists tend to consider their "faith" a private matter, with too many personal wrinkles to be of much direct relevance to others. If true, this is probably because we all come to our convictions independently, in complex ways, spurning the notion of an atheist "bible" or "church" and relying – as stated above – on our experience, knowledge and thought. (Ironically, it is believers with their sacred texts who preach to us the virtues of personal experiences, somehow managing to assume that atheists can have none – or they wouldn't be atheists!) I have never heard of "instant" atheist conversions and would be very doubtful about any such, though the realisation how far one has travelled towards committed atheism may indeed come as a sudden revelation, as it did to that C of E clergyman I was mentioning recently, and – yes – as it did to me once.

Both these reasons apply to me too, but having been provoked in topic 229 into a statement of my philosophical position, I've come to the conclusion that on balance (very much on balance!) it is better to try explaining my convictions, even though there is some unavoidable risk of doing more damage than good. Some think that I am simply making myself ridiculous. Well, the older one gets, the more one is aware of the deep truth of the old dictum: "You wouldn't worry so much about what others think about you if you knew how little they do." Amen.

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If your idea of a fundamental question in life is "when are they going to sack Graham Taylor?", "why does Spock have pointy ears?" or "why don't they pay me more than they do?", stop reading *now* and spare yourself unnecessary mental suffering.

Sooner or later, most people come to ask themselves – "what am I here for?" and "is there any meaning to all this?" and "where does my sense of right and wrong come from?". Some promptly forget that they ever asked, some come to enjoy the anguish of the asking and never seriously attempt to find any answers, while some never even bother to ask in the first instance (AND THEY SHOULD HAVE STOPPED READING WHEN TOLD TO DO SO!). Let us leave all these in peace, and concern ourselves with those who do ask the questions and make a serious attempt to find some answers.

It does not seem to make much difference what one's nominal belief is before such time. Life before asking the questions (let alone before answering them) is suddenly seen as shallow or even worthless. Religious believers claim that only religion (their own, of course) can provide meaningful answers and cite their and their co-believing friends' experiences to prove the fact. Undeniably, religions do provide ready-made answers and hence the outcome of such questioning often is a religious conversion, which paradoxically may actually be a "conversion" to one's original faith – this time in a personally meaningful and committed way. In the vast majority of cases, having discovered the answers in a particular religion, a believer remains faithful to this religion.

There is, however, a fly in the religious ointment – there is more than one religion and each one purports to present the unique and absolute set of answers. As somebody already pointed out, this in itself proves nothing, but it does complicate the picture. Instead of the simple choice – either religious believers are right or atheists are right, we now have three options.

Firstly, one religion may indeed be true and all the rest false. The question is, which one? All believers, regardless of their faith speak in terms of light, fulfilment, joy, certainty, acceptance, deliverance, personal Epiphanies, miracles, healing etc... How is one to decide which religion genuinely delivers these "benefits" and which are simply victims of cruel illusions – presumably fostered by the prince of darkness as a part of a divine plan to test mankind. This is a quandary familiar enough from magical fairy tales – an evil magician has transformed the princess into a rose and the prince is faced with the impossible task of making the single correct choice out of a bunch of roses. How should he choose?

Secondly, all religions may be pointing to one truth. Whenever believers get uneasy about justifying their religion in the face of identical claims of their rivals, they attempt, yet again, to arrive at some syncretic consensus affirming the unity of all belief – the kind "Pardon Me" has been advocating. These efforts never come to very much – the differences between religions are too great. One has to encompass the Jewish/Christian/Moslem monotheism (manifold flavours of), the Hindu and pagan polytheism, Buddhist non-theism,

Shinto animism... The price, therefore, is to ditch all "details" which make the religions relevant to the grass-root faithful (e.g. God in Pardon's report) and to agree on a set of ethical rules instead. This still does not exclude the possibility that there is some syncretic deity, which gets so delighted when a believer adopts a code of ethics, that the full "benefits" of a religion are bestowed upon him. Only... what about an ethical atheist? If it were possible to derive an ethical code within an atheist framework (as I intend to argue on some other occasion that it is) – the atheist "faith" then becomes as "valid" as any other faith.

Thirdly, it is possible that atheists are right. If so, atheism would have to be able to explain the effects religious belief has on believers. It would also have to answer the claim that even if there were no God, one would have to be invented, because without God there can be no ethical standard. Again I intend to explore these issues on some future occasion, but we can start in a small way now, by considering the above conundrum of the enchanted bunch of roses.

What is the prince to do? He can simply make a random choice determined by the surrounding culture, his upbringing, his circle of friends, the books he happens to read – regardless of his choice, the rose will turn into a beautiful maiden with whom he almost certainly will be in love for the rest of his life. Yet only one choice is the true one. Now, if I were in his position, which I no longer am, I would at least make an attempt to enquire into the nature of the enchantment which so thoroughly disguises his one true love.

In this particular case the enchantment is not very subtle but it is extremely powerful – it is called "positive feedback". All theistic religions are self-validating, metaphysically closed systems. (I must stress again that this observation in no way precludes one of them to be true – one should not confuse the phenomenology of religion with its substance!) Once a theistic faith is adopted it cannot but validate itself. Consider, for example the experience of a spontaneous cure after a prayer to Christ.

Neither the sufferer, nor anybody else is in a position to discover whether the same cure would not have occurred after a prayer to, say, Mithra or after a session with a hypnotist or simply spontaneously on its own. Furthermore, a Christian is unlikely to start praying to Mithra (or Odin, or Ra, or...) and is therefore no longer in a position to discover whether an alternative religion would have provided an equal succour. This reduces us to the following possibilities: the believer prays and is cured – his faith is confirmed; he prays and isn't cured - he didn't show enough faith or the Lord chose not to hear his prayer; he does not pray and is cured – blessed be the mercy of the Lord who can read human heart even without an explicit prayer; he does not pray and is not cured – his faith is confirmed.

Observe, that there is no possible outcome which would contradict the believer's faith – it is reinforced even by totally random outcomes. As another example, prophecies either come true, or will still come true at some unspecified future time (like the eagerly awaited Ozone's conversion :-), or – if the prophet was incautious enough to be too specific about timing, arbitrary time units are substituted to make things right, or in the final resort there is always the unknowable will of God or machinations of Satan. And so on...

OK, these are extreme examples and not all believers justify their faith in those terms, but the point holds for them as well – theistic religions are not falsifiable in the Popperian sense. Yet again, the importance of this fact should not be overstated. Many atheists make the mistake of assuming that this somehow proves the believer's faith to be wrong, but that's just bad logic – all it shows is that irrespective of being right or wrong a religious

belief inevitably reinforces itself. Many believers assume that this reinforcement somehow proves their faith to be right, but this is again bad logic – the mirror image of the atheist's error.

Topic 299, note 41 of 92 – "Yrth (a.k.a. Duke)" - 18-OCT-1993 14:16
<Beginning to spill the beans>

It is worth asking oneself, to what extent questions of metaphysical belief can be meaningfully discussed in this format. The experience of the religious topic 229 sometimes suggested that the answer might be "no", but I do not subscribe to such pessimistic view. Examining these matters can be useful in at least two different ways.

Firstly, I think human mind is quite capable of holding beliefs which do not make sense by its own lights (and I must entertain the possibility that this may apply to me too.) A quite effective mental equivalent of a visual blind spot can be produced by a combination of mental compartmentalisation and of rationalised disinclination to probe certain areas of one's beliefs. So, while a set of beliefs makes fundamentally sense "with" its holder, it not need do so *to* the holder, should he care to examine his beliefs in full.

Secondly, I believe that our shared humanity – without which only most primitive communication would be possible – allows us to comprehend, albeit only partially, another's beliefs and the consequent world-view. By this I do not mean merely intellectual comprehension but also a degree of emotional insight.

BTW, that's one of the things I find frustrating in these discussions. While I can see how the world "hangs together" for individual believers (be it in their different ways Keel, Swamper, Mo, Goddess, yourself or Hamza – though he's much more difficult, because I lack the specifics of the Islamic background) without coming up with a generic caricature, the believers appear to be either unable or unwilling to do the same. One can discount the farce of Keel simply refusing to accept that non-believers might not see his "advantages" attractive, or refusing to credit that I do believe what I say I believe. But let's face it, this goes deeper – the notion of atheism as a positive experience meets with blank stares. At best it seems to be reduced to "freedom from responsibility", which is a fundamental misunderstanding.

True, it is not *a priori* clear to me why we should think that it should be possible to determine an absolute ethical standard. While it may be thought *desirable* to be able to do so (just like physicists used to think it desirable to be able to derive an absolute framework of space and time), I can see no evidence to suggest that it is actually possible. And seeing no such evidence, by Occam's razor, I feel the need to avoid postulating something for which I see no evidence.

However, I believe that a practical code of ethics *can* be derived without recourse to divine instruction and it seems to me that this code in fact underlies all religious codes, insofar as these have a universal validity. In fact, I see at least four intertwining strands to this theme, which all appear to support each other. I am currently trying to elaborate this subject in yet another "atheist sermon", but it is proving difficult – simply because in this forum I cannot assume readers to be familiar with works on which I base my convictions, so that explanations are either immense or are likely to be insufficient.

Still, let me name my four strands – however cryptically – just in case you have the relevant background to anticipate some of my arguments.

1. Shopenhauer – ethics and compassion.
 2. Depth psychology – archetypes and "ground of Being".
 3. Torque's "nice boy" – empathy and evolution.
 4. Prisoner's dilemma – Tough But Fair.
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Topic 299 note 82 of 92 – "Yrth (a.k.a. Duke)" - 9-NOV-1993 17:22
<This took long enough to write!>

Philosophical embarrassment over the non-existence of God is notorious: "If God is dead, then everything is allowed!". Philosophers really ought to know better. It is not the existence of God that prevents a complete anarchy in human society, but the existence of an accepted set of values which guide or restrain human behaviour. Hence the above statement implicitly reads: "If God is dead, there are no values and if there are no values, then everything is allowed." While I readily grant the second half of this fuller proposition, the first half only follows if one believes that all value systems must be divinely inspired. Is there any evidence for this?

I intend to argue (1) that unless we assume *a priori* this to be the case, we have in fact evidence to the contrary, (2) that if the *a priori* assumption is made, we are left with no evidence either way and (3) that neither conclusion leads to a moral catastrophe.

First of all, it should be noted that there is no known example of a human society which does not have a code of "right & wrong" which restrains the behaviour of an individual, be it by ethical principles or magical taboos and rituals. For whatever reason, limitations to "everything is allowed!" appear to be built into any human society. In many cases these limitations appear arbitrary or even cruel and inhuman from the viewpoint of our set of ethical values, but it cannot be denied that they exist.

Needless to say, believers are not interested in such arbitrary "values", which to them are either satanic perversions of the "true" God-given values or a dim anticipation of the same. The unstated requirement is that if a godless code is to be derived, it will only do if it embodies all the main features of the code based on the believer's values (Christian, or Islamic, or Buddhist...). The philosophical moral panic now stands revealed as "If there is no God, there is no longer anything to guarantee the preservation of values we consider good!" – a far cry indeed from "everything is allowed!".

While this attitude smacks to me of "moral imperialism", I am prepared to accept the demand, because I think it is right, though for entirely wrong reasons. As syncretists keep reminding us, the "noblest", the "purest" parts of ethical systems of all major religions show marked similarities, strongly suggesting that *if* these systems are thoroughly human creations, as I believe they are, then an atheist code, anchored in humanity rather than in divinity, should also exhibit the same syncretic features.

Interestingly enough, we have a clear evidence that something strikingly reminiscent of

"our" moral values was recognised centuries before Christ in ancient Greece. When in Plato's dialogues Socrates argues for a particular position on the grounds that so-and-so simply cannot be morally right, he clearly assumes this argument immediately obvious to his audience. E.g., in arguing against the simplistic definition of justice as paying one's debts, he gives an example of returning a borrowed sword to a man gone mad in the meantime, who is likely to run amok with it and concludes that this clearly cannot be right. There is nothing in Greek mythology or religion about sacredness of life or an equivalent to "thou shalt not kill" - so where does this moral background come from in 400 BC?

There is, of course, the familiar counter-argument, that we should not be misled by such similarities of moral code, because Greeks thought nothing of exposing unwanted or deformed babies and did not treat slaves as human. This strikes me as a clumsy evasive manoeuvre, which omits to mention that until quite recently, most obnoxious slavery existed in the Christian world and that racism is still very much with us, even among decent God-fearing folk. It all simply depends on how we define our fellow humans, the point being that *within* this arbitrarily drawn circle of humanity, recognisable ethical values existed centuries before Christ, in a thoroughly pagan society, quite oblivious of the God of Jewish tribes somewhere far away. The question is, where did those ethical values come from?

As far as I can see, the only answer open to a believer is that clearly God inspires even non-believers to be able to tell good from evil, regardless of their mistaken beliefs in other areas. But this simply begs the question. If this argument is accepted, then it becomes in principle impossible to demonstrate that without God there can be no ethical values, because wherever ethical values are found, God's influence is postulated. By the same token, should an atheist succeed in grounding his ethics in humanity instead of divinity, the same argument will apply.

There is, of course, a very obvious way of accounting for all of this, which curiously enough, should be acceptable to both believers and non-believers. It is the first strand of the four previously mentioned, out of which I weave my convictions on the subject. (This by no means implies that I arrived at my convictions by following those four strands - a situation familiar to any mathematician, I am sure). So...

I. Shopenhauer – ethics and compassion.

This is a subject for either a long exposition or a very brief suggestion to read Shopenhauer's famous paper "The Foundation of Morality". There is no way I could argue his case more exhaustively or eloquently than the author, so I'll just settle for a few quotes:

The sort of act I am here discussing is not something that I have merely dreamed up or conjured out of thin air, but a reality – in fact, a not unusual reality, it is, namely, the everyday phenomenon of compassion, which is to say: immediate participation, released from all other considerations, first, in the pain of another , and then, in the alleviation or termination of that pain [...]: which alone is the true ground of all autonomous righteousness and of all true human love. An act can be said to have genuine moral worth only in so far as it stems from this source; and conversely, an act from any other source has none.

Strong stuff, but I don't think thoughtful believers will object too violently, as long as I play fair and complete the quote:

The weal and woe of another comes to lie directly on my heart in exactly the same way – though not always to the same degree – as otherwise only my own would lie, as soon as this sentiment of compassion is aroused, and therewith, the difference between him and me is no longer absolute. And this really is amazing – even mysterious. It is, in fact, the great mystery inherent in all morality, the prime integrant of ethics, and a gate beyond which the only type of speculation that can presume to venture a single step must be metaphysical.

We all have our knee-jerk reactions and one of mine is to smell a rat whenever a philosopher suddenly starts talking about what type of enquiry or even just speculation can or cannot be "presumed". Shopenhauer's difficulty stems from a feeling that the human faculty of compassion needs itself to be explained and the only way he can see of doing that is by appealing to the "ground of Being" as in their individual ways do all religions:

For if plurality and distinction belong only to this world of *appearances*, and if one and the same Being is what is beheld in all these living things, well then, the experience that dissolves the distinction between I and the Not-I cannot be false [...] *That* experience, therefore, must be the metaphysical ground of ethics and consist simply in this: that *one* individual should recognise in *another*, himself in his own true being.

Sensei would be right at home here – as Shopenhauer was well aware - but for myself, I can see no reason to drag in metaphysics. In keeping with the spirit of his times, the author simply assumed that any speculation other than metaphysical should not be attempted. While I fully agree with his argued conclusions, the times have changed and we no longer need to hush our voices, take off our hats and shuffle our feet just because it might be thought "presumptuous" not to do so.

I must point out, however, that I *could* rest my argument here. I could argue that the faculty of compassion is a fact of life, just like the existence of a fibula. Whether or not this fact is simply a divine gift is no more relevant to constructing a mundanely based code of ethics, than is the question of whether the universe had a creator is to construction of mundane laws of physics. Both may or may not follow from the creator's acts but do not subsequently demand any divine intervention or inspiration.

Nevertheless, I will attempt to do more than that. If nothing else, this is an interesting subject. Next time...

[The "next time" never happened – Open Forum got shut down instead.]
