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The Faith of an Atheist

The seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes is best known for his dictum, *“I am absolutely sure of this: I think, therefore I am.”*

Seeking to develop a thoroughly reliable philosophy, Descartes determined to build from the ground up. The thinker became his ground-truth. If I can know anything then at least a knower, an “I”, must exist.

Modern science, being largely *confined* in accordance with atheistic naturalistic assumptions, has no place for consciousness. This is known as one of the “hard problems” of science. Many atheistic philosophers and scientists have attempted to argue consciousness is an illusion or at least that it’s less fundamental than Descartes claims.

All chemicals, no free will

If we consider the naturalistic assumption that we are simply the byproduct of a physical universe which didn’t have us in mind, then our process of thinking is merely the result of chemical reactions and physical “events” within a mindlessly produced brain. There is no objective “me” as such. If that’s so, what can the bouncing atoms I call “me” know with certainty? The surprising answer is *nothing*, because in this view even our thoughts are bound to the cause-and-effect relationship of the natural world. In other words, It’s physics which explains our thoughts. So if I ask what causes my thoughts I can follow the causal chain that leads me to that thought or decision, and in the end, all I get is physical laws acting on matter, right back to the big bang. This raises the question: do we really make rational choices? If it is true that our thoughts can be reduced to physical and chemical events alone then our thoughts are neither right nor wrong, they just happen. The issue with this, as J. B. S. Haldane long ago pointed out, is that if your thoughts are just a by-product of a flickering of electrons and a fizzing of chemicals in your brain, that may make your thoughts chemically sound, but it does not make them logically sound.

Richard Dawkins confessed that he dreads the question of free will. He explains: *“I have a materialist view of the world. I think that things are determined by prior events, including our thoughts. That commits me to the view that free will and free choice is therefore a delusion.”* Atheist Daniel Dennett says the same, claiming that all of your beliefs, values and, above all, your thinking and your reasoning - are nothing more the movement of atoms jostling together.

Do you see the problem? The worldview of naturalism (which denies the existence of God), implies we should not trust any of our convictions and thoughts seriously, but that must also necessarily include the belief in naturalism itself. The view of naturalism is demolished by its own credentials. As C.S. Lewis said, *“It would be an argument which proved that no argument was sound — a proof that there are no such things as proofs.”* This is self-defeating for the naturalist because if naturalism is true the naturalist has no good reason to believe it since we can’t actually know it is

true.

Now some argue that evolution has trained us to develop beliefs that correspond closely to reality as true beliefs confer a survival advantage. For example, if there is a tiger hiding behind a bush by the side of the trail and my belief corresponds to that reality then I'm more likely to survive and later pass on my DNA, right? The problem with this argument is that it pretty much only applies to recognising threats and opportunities in our physical environment, our ability to communicate and strictly survival-based problem-solving. What survival advantage does having a consistent philosophy confer? Indeed, many atheists argue that the human trait of religiosity evolved for our survival benefit; if this is true then it proves the point that evolved rationality can't be trusted to lead to correct beliefs unless we are right to believe in god(s), in which case atheism also fails. If our rationality has been purely honed by the powers of evolution for our survival alone then why should we trust it to help us decode DNA, write complex computer software and discover the Higgs boson? These things have nothing to do with survival or passing on our DNA. Therefore, beliefs developed to help us survive do not necessarily correspond to reality. I mean how can we be so sure naturalism is true if other evolved beliefs, such as religiosity, are false? Both rely on the same evolved rationality if naturalism is to be believed. So a naturalist and therefore atheist cannot claim to have the free will and self-awareness to think about different theories and ideas, evaluate the evidence and make a better choice of which is right or wrong than the theist. We are just slaves to our biochemical responses which nature has imposed on us for our survival benefit alone. So there is nothing we can truly be sure of. Nothing.

To take this one step further, if consciousness is *purely material* then there is no knower as such, and my thinking is an illusion as well as my beliefs, atheistic or otherwise. According to strict materialism, only material things exist, yet beliefs are immaterial. Therefore, I can't believe in materialism as it excludes the possibility of belief.

Can we be sure of at least one thing? Descartes thought so. He decided that the one thing we can know is that we exist. How does he know this? Well, it would seem pretty obvious since we need to exist to ask ourselves whether we do exist. In his mind, our existence is therefore the most basic form of knowledge, the only thing we can truly know for certain.

But not so quick, René! Can you even be sure of your own existence? It sounds silly to question this, but think about it, "I think therefore I am" is not the most fundamental claim we can make about the nature of knowledge. This is because "I think therefore I am" depends critically on "therefore"—that is, it depends on logic, specifically on what's called the *law of non-contradiction*. But can we trust our logic?

Logic

The law of noncontradiction states that two contradictory positions cannot both be true in the same way at the same time. I cannot exist (in order to assert my existence) and simultaneously not exist. Of course, we all accept that law; it's the basic law of logic. But notice—we *believe* in the law of non-contradiction; we don't *know* it. And we can't logically claim that we do know it. Why? Because any claim to the truth of logic depends on... you guessed it, logic (i.e. the law of non-contradiction). This sounds confusing but the point is that to claim that the law of non-contradiction is certain is to reason in a circle. You can't justify logic with logic because that's circular and therefore groundless (but what do I know, I'm still only using logic to make this argument, which I can't 'know' to be true without being self-referential). Therefore because we can't *prove* that logic is true Rene Descartes could have been wrong and therefore we can't even claim to know with certainty that we exist. Therefore, in reference to Descartes' statement, maybe we are just thinking without existing. Of

course, no one actually believes this, we all take the laws of logic to be acceptable and true and we assume that the universe is logical and reasonable in this way. But the point is that to invoke a law of logic, however obvious it seems, we must take it on faith. We trust. So, in summary: our most fundamental knowledge is of logic—specifically, the law of non-contradiction—and even that we *must take on faith*. Faith, otherwise known as trust, is fundamental to it all.

So we are all in a position of radical scepticism—we have absolutely certain knowledge of nothing, not even of the laws of logic, not even of the certainty of our own existence. But of course, we all believe that logic is true, that we exist. These are reasonable beliefs and life would be unlivable if we didn't believe them to be true. We all have faith in our knowledge of logic, faith in our existence, and faith in countless other reasonable things. But it *is* certainly faith.

There's no escaping faith

Not all faith is equal; atheists and those who believe in God (like myself) have very different kinds of faith in logic, reason, existence, etc. Because logic cannot possibly be justified without being self-referential (and therefore illogical), atheists must take *everything* on *blind* faith, that is, a faith which is irrational (i.e. has no basis). Their faith is unsupportable in the sense that the faith which atheists hold is without a rational framework. For the atheist, there is no explanation for the law of logic, and indeed no explanation can be given; it is just a matter of faith. For me, such a kind of faith is frustrating. Embracing this type of faith is thoughtless, there is no supportive reason or meaning to it. No explanations can be given and neither can one be expected. Thus, living in this type of faith is living in the dark.

For this reason, I find it confusing when atheists passionately tell me that faith is foolish as if they exclude their own faith, and sure, I agree, I do find their faith to be absurd. Richard Dawkins goes as far as to describe faith as “evil”, ignorant of the fact that he is full of faith. We all are. For Dawkins and atheists of his ilk, there is a frequent tendency to contrast “faith” with evidence and reason, which is simply nonsense. This ignorance is founded in a lack of understanding between the crucial connection between “trust” and “faith”. The clue is actually in the very word “faith” itself, which comes from the Latin word *fides*, meaning “trust” or “reliability”. For me, true faith is trust built because of an appreciation of evidence.

For example, what does it mean to trust somebody? Why is it that people generally trust their parents, friends, and spouses, but are more hesitant when it comes to politicians or journalists? Well, I have a good reason to trust my family because time and experience have led me to believe that they are trustworthy. Because of that, I'm willing to exercise faith, to place my trust, to believe in them. My faith is not disconnected from the evidence; it's precisely because of the evidence. Faith and evidence are thus closely connected - or, to put it another way, our faith in something or someone flows from our belief that they are trustworthy. Christianity has never seen blind faith as a virtue, “*always be prepared to give a reason for the hope you have...*”, and it's exactly this reason we dismiss the faith of an atheist, it is blind faith - at bottom atheists must trust the law logic without any basis or evidence. This is inescapable.

On the other hand, those who believe in a God who is omniscient and who is the source of all truth and reason, have a *coherent* epistemology. As a Christian, we still need faith as everyone does, but our faith is in the source of all logic and truth, so our confidence in the laws of logic and the certainty of existence and of moral law are rational consequences of our fundamental faith in God. The Christian faith is knowing that God is real and that you can trust Him. You cannot trust someone who isn't there, nor can you rely on someone who's not reliable. Faith does not make God real. On the contrary, faith is the response to a real God who wants to be known to us. Faith doesn't mean

hoping in what isn't true; it means confidence in the character of a God we have reason to trust. And so compelling evidence, evidence that engages rationality, is one of the greatest boosts of Christian faith.

The question is not whether you have faith. You do; we all do - the atheist and the theist, the sceptic and the seeker, the doubter and the disciple. Rather, the question is simply this: is whatever you are placing your faith in able to bear the weight, is it trustworthy? All human knowledge is founded in faith. Atheism is incoherent faith—the belief that logic and existence are mere brutes without grounding. Belief in God is coherent faith—the belief in a creator who is the source of logic and existence. Therefore it's not unreasonable to say that unlike atheistic belief, theism provides a coherent framework within which to understand reality.