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IS IT IMMORAL TO BELIEVE IN GOD?

by Matthew Flannagan

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In a recent op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, the distinguished philosopher of science Michael Ruse raises the question, Is it *morally* wrong to believe in God?¹ Some skeptics maintain there is something *irrational* about theism. But is it immoral?

Behind the question is the rhetoric of the New Atheism represented in the writings of people such as Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris. Ruse historically has been fairly critical of New Atheism and maintains that, although New Atheists are “self-confident to a degree that seems designed to irritate,” they display “an ignorance of anything beyond their fields to an extent remarkable even in modern academia.”

However, behind their remarkable uninformed hubris is a “moral passion unknown outside the pages of the Old Testament.” Ruse notes that “atheists of Dawkins’ stripe don’t just say that believing in God is an intellectual mistake. They also claim that it’s morally wrong to believe in the existence of God or gods.” Ruse appears to have some sympathy with this motif of their thought and attempts to defend it.

One can understand an atheist saying that theism is false. But why would one claim there was something *immoral* about believing in God? One reason Ruse briefly raises is the spectre of religiously motivated atrocities, citing the Troubles in Northern Ireland, 9/11, and murders of the Charlie Hebdo staff in Paris. Ruse expresses disgust that “people can be thus motivated to be so cruel to their fellow human beings.”

Indeed, such cruelty is disgusting. Still, it is hard to see why such disgust justifies the conclusion that there is something immoral about belief in God. “The sadism of shooting someone in the back so they will never walk again because they are a Catholic not a Protestant—or any such variation—is nauseating.” But it is no less nauseating when a person shoots another in the back because he holds different political views, comes from a different nation, or has looked the wrong way at the killer’s wife. Terrorism in the name of religion fills us with horror, but so does the Terror during the French Revolution where people were slaughtered in the name of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Yet these facts do not lead us to conclude that it is morally wrong to have political beliefs, love one’s wife, or support freedom and equality. Had the 9/11 attack been performed by an eco-terrorist group as opposed to jihadists, I doubt many would conclude that it is morally wrong to support political causes or to care for the

environment.

Ruse, however, moves beyond arguing from atrocities. What leads to moral issues is that there are “arguments going both ways” when it comes to the existence of God. The question of God’s existence is not as easily solved as basic mathematical questions, such as $1+1=2$. Indeed it is not, and nor for that matter is any philosophical, moral, or political issue. Ruse’s own discipline of analytic philosophy is full of disputes about the nature of mathematical truth, what distinguishes science from pseudoscience, whether science gives us truth or simply empirically adequate models, the existence and origin of objective morality, and so on. None of these are solved as easily as basic mathematics. Surely Ruse, however, is not claiming that it is immoral to hold any philosophical beliefs. Is there something morally problematic, for example, about holding to a particular account of what distinguishes science from nonscience? Or is it morally problematic to hold moral beliefs, such as the belief that it is immoral to believe in God? What exactly, then, is the problem?

Ruse’s answer appears to be twofold. First, he thinks there is “paltry evidence” for God’s existence. Second, despite this fact, theists continue to believe in God on the basis of “indoctrination” and wish fulfilment. This, he maintains, is the “deepest and most powerful moral objection to theism.” Is this objection powerful? Let’s examine the first point, the claim that there is “paltry evidence” for theism.

PALTRY EVIDENCE?

Ruse offers an extremely brief and superficial account of some arguments for God’s existence, and without any discussion or elaboration states they provide “good reasons to think that there is more than meets the eye.” However, the claim that God exists, he contends, is subject to serious problems.

Problem of Evil

He raises the standard problem of evil: “God is supposed to be both all loving and all powerful. If so, why does he/she allow human suffering? For war, starvation or painful diseases to exist? And more to the point, perhaps, why does he allow the abuse of children by members of the clergy of his/her own religion, whether they be Catholic priests, Jewish rabbis, Muslim clerics or Protestant pastors?”

One wonders why it is abuse of children by *the clergy* that is singled out here. A high proportion of child abuse is, after all, perpetuated by laity, trusted counsellors, school teachers, and even parents. And it is unclear to me why such instances are any less offensive to a loving and just God.

But putting rhetorical barbs aside, the overall argument here is clear. It is the standard argument from suffering: if God is all knowing and all powerful, then He is able to prevent suffering. If God is good, He would prevent such suffering, unless He had a really good reason for allowing it. What then is this reason? Why does He allow it? We do not appear to have any answer to this question.

It is hard to overestimate the rhetorical and emotional pull of this argument. Nevertheless, in the last few decades, many philosophers have found that when

examined rationally, it has an important flaw. The argument establishes that if God exists, then He *must* have a good reason for allowing suffering. Ruse then asks theists to provide an account of what this reason is. The assumption seems to be that *if a believer cannot give a precise account of God's reasons, then there probably are none*. It is this assumption on which the argument hangs or falls. However, this assumption is questionable. Philosopher Alvin Plantinga provides the following illustration:

I look inside my tent: I don't see a St. Bernard; it is then probable that there is no St. Bernard in my tent. That is because if there were one there, I would very likely have seen it; it's not easy for a St. Bernard to avoid detection in a small tent. Again, I look inside my tent: I don't see any noseemus (very small midges with a bite out of all proportion to their size); this time it is not particularly probable that there are no noseemus in my tent—at least it isn't any more probable than before I looked. The reason, of course, is that even if there were noseemus there, I wouldn't see 'em; they're too small to see. And now the question is whether God's reasons, if any, for permitting such evils are more like St. Bernards or more like noseemus.²

The assumption from Ruse's point of view is that God's reasons for permitting evil are "more like St Bernards" than "noseemus"; in other words, if a finite human being with limited factual knowledge, limited perspective in time and space, and an imperfect moral character does not know of any good reason for why suffering occurs, then it is clear that God—an omniscient, morally perfect being—cannot know of one. I know of no reason for thinking this assumption is true, and in fact Ruse makes no attempt to defend it. He simply repeats it intact and hopes his readers will accept it.³

Religious Pluralism

Another problem with belief in God is the familiar challenge of religious pluralism. Ruse asks, "If the Christian God is absolute how could such an astonishing variety of alternative beliefs flourish? Why does the Pope believe one thing and the Dalai Lama believe something completely different? Not just a bit different—like the variations in belief between Jews and Catholics—but completely different."

It is again, however, hard to see what the objection is supposed to be here. Why does the fact that people disagree about the nature of God and various assorted claims related to Him entail that He does not exist? Usually the appeal to pluralism is intended to undercut the rational justification of belief in God. The fact of religious pluralism tells us that there are numerous people in the world equally as intelligent as you and I who are often just as ostensibly sincere as we are, that these people are not obviously more or less virtuous than we are, and they reject theism. So, absent some compelling proof for God's existence, it is dogmatic, irrational, and arbitrary to claim that God exists in the face of pervasive religious pluralism.

However, if this is what Ruse is driving at, his argument is self-refuting. Notice it is again based on an implicit assumption: *it is arrogant to believe a proposition in the absence of proof if other intelligent, educated people do not hold that proposition*. This assumption itself is a proposition that many intelligent, educated people do not hold.

The literature on epistemological disagreement and religious pluralism shows there are many who reject this view. Hence, if the assumption is true, then it is arrogant to believe it without proof. Neither I nor the proponent of this assumption can therefore rationally accept it.

Further, suppose for the sake of argument I accepted that it was irrational to embrace theism in the face of widespread pluralism. What then should I do? Presumably I should cease to believe in God. But if I do this, am I not adopting a position that is contrary to that held by many intelligent, educated people? What about the many Christians, for example, who do not reject theism, not to mention Jews or Muslims, or even just generic theists?

INDOCTRINATION?

It is perhaps here that Ruse's second point kicks in. Ruse appears to think that theists continue to believe largely on the basis of "self-deception" and "indoctrination." He asks, "So, if there are so many problems with theistic belief, why do people continue to take it seriously?" and answers, "The truth is that many don't. In parts of the world where people are allowed and encouraged to take these things seriously and to think them through, people increasingly find that they can do without the God factor. It is in places where one is being indoctrinated from childhood and bullied in adulthood that people continue with God belief."

Ruse does not cite any demographics to back up this claim and, *prima facie*, such claims appear dubious. Consider, for example, a survey done by WIN-Gallup International on worldwide demographics of both atheism and religious belief.⁴ According to this study, the country that has the largest percentage of atheists is the People's Republic of China. The same survey found that the country that had experienced the largest decrease in religiosity since 2005 was Vietnam, and the European country with the highest percentage of atheists was the Czech Republic. It is not hard to discern reasons why communist and former communist countries would feature highly in such surveys, and it is not because such countries are places where people are "allowed and encouraged" to think through the question of God's existence, without childhood indoctrination, fear, or bullying.

Nor does the evidence support the claim that in contexts where the arguments for and against God's existence are carefully studied and considered the result is increasing disbelief. Recent surveys by PhilPapers⁵ that looked at the beliefs of contemporary philosophers found belief in God was in fact disproportionately *higher* among those who actively studied and thought through these kinds of questions. Atheism was significantly higher among those philosophers who specialized in *other* areas of philosophy and did not devote much time to working on these sorts of questions.

In the end, Ruse simply affirms there is "*a feeling* that when people are given the chance to decide for themselves and still stay religious it is for the wrong reasons" (emphasis added), citing such things as wish fulfillment or fear of death and his own desire to have "one last hour of conversation" with his deceased mother.

But is this really adequate? Are we really to contend that theists believe for irrational reasons simply because some atheists *feel* that way? Surely something much stronger than this is needed to establish the claim that the majority of the world's population are gullible, indoctrinated, self-deceived people who act immorally by believing in God.

Ruse is correct to note the moral passions behind many atheist writings. However, his attempt to vindicate or defend these passions as justified fails. We lack any reason to think it is immoral to believe in God or that belief in God is less defensible morally or rationally than any other controversial position in the philosophical literature.

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NOTES

- 1 Michael Ruse, "Why God Is a Moral Issue," *New York Times* Opinionator, March 23, 2015.
- 2 Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 466.
- 3 For a discussion of possible reasons God might have in allowing suffering, see Clay Jones, "Why Did God Let That Child Die?" *Christian Research Journal* 38, 1 (2015): 10–15.
- 4 "The Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism—2012," WIN-Gallup International, <http://www.wingia.com/web/files/news/14/file/14.pdf>, accessed May 4, 2015.
- 5 See <http://philpapers.org/surveys/>, accessed June 3, 2015.