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NEITHER ATHEIST, NOT BELIEVER NOR YET AGNOSTIC: TOWARDS A FOURTH POSITION

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ABSTRACT

This brief article begins with outlining the beliefs of the atheist, believer and agnostic. It was found that although they each appear to contain a kernel of truth, there are various deficiencies in each argument. It is then put forward an alternative to such positions and one that appears to embrace them all, while in itself not being anything of substance. Yet it is precisely in such insubstantiality that the debate itself is resolved or dissolves and an amorphous “form” follows, one that may save us from the often-devastating decisions to be any one of atheist, believer or agnostic and instead invites a more holistic perception and a less rigid way of being. One that is less attached to identity and “truth” and more akin to the flowing nature of water or the penetrating beauty of light. This I dub “the fourth position” (dimension), though the name is insignificant.

KEYWORDS

Atheism; belief; agnostic; new conception; water.



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Introduction

It would appear there can only be three attitudes towards God, God being defined as the creator and sustainer of all existence, incorporeal and infinite. One either accents to the existence of such a Being, denies such an existence or remains doubtful. In this brief account, I will argue that there is another position that neither suffers from the advantages nor disadvantages of these options. In this essay, I will first define and outline each position, then state the advantages of each followed by their drawbacks. I will suggest that such deficiencies in any of these positions may be surmounted with a further position, one which does not defy logic though it is quite a subtle conception. If such a position is tenable it curiously embraces all three notions.

1. *The Atheist*

The atheist pronounces with absolute certainty that there is no God, no Creator or overseer of the universe as a whole. Such conviction is based on a number of arguments:

- The existence of evil and suffering proves that there cannot be a benevolent force that orchestrates life itself.
- Proving a wholly spiritual Being cannot be attained where proof can only deal with that which is measurable in terms of empirical observation.
- The existence of God could only be an axiom and therefore at best and as a root cause for all that is and continues to be, is merely an article of faith and therefore without justification.
- Religions differ as to their definition of God and thus a singular power is highly unlikely. Even if there were such a power, the laws of nature and the four basic forces suffice as a causal explanation as to how things operate without recourse to an unquantifiable, unseen God.
- If there were such a God and such a God is said to be benevolent, then why is there hardly ever intervention on “His” part to mitigate the power of evil or to deliver justice or to console the suffering of creatures?

The advantages of such a position are that there is no need to rely on faith and belief in order to understand and make sense of the universe. As a consequence, one is wholly self-sufficient and scientific in one’s approach, explaining the mystery of the universe without recourse to unseen, unproven forces, or entities, but simply in terms of an explanatory network that is rigorously logical, scientific and “closed” I.e., links in a system of cause and effect without seeking occult explanation. This coheres with a modernist framework, the paradigm of the Enlightenment and the progress of science as a mechanism to explain how nature works as a system where the parts are dependent on one another and can be reduced to smaller bits and more fundamental causes. The positive value of such a position is that it does not infer from the universe a host of fictional gods or a singular, all-powerful overseer but allows for natural forces as an explanatory system in logical fashion. It is precisely such a view which has led mankind beyond human sacrifice; witch-hunts; bigotry; superstitions and worship of fictional beings and the like.

This has led to incredible human progress – in medicine, in law; in the arts (as it separated itself from religious dogma and adherence) as well as in the subjugation of the other through reforms that are designed to convert the other to some system of belief said to be in accordance with the divine – and often through all manners of torture. Rather, natural causes grant great explanatory depth and frees man’s mind from the pathetic distinctions between the heavens and the earth, for the former as with latter, are both within the power and understanding of mechanistic causal explanation and exploration. The philosophy that best accords with such a stance is Existentialism with its proclamation that

“existence precedes essence”, that is there is no pre given nature or divine fate, but what one makes of one’s life and of existence itself.

However, there are several drawbacks: There is something quite undefinable and unquantifiable about the processes of life itself, about the qualitative nature of being human and indeed in the very idea that man can discern laws and through reason understand such processes. In fact, many scientists in the infancy of science were wholly religious men and even today speak of the infinite mystery of life even if certain aspects may well be explained. And this attitude extends very often to artists and certainly the recorded experiences of mystics and spiritualists. The subtle awareness we call consciousness has yet to be understood and it appears cannot be understood through the operation of physical processes themselves – an x-factor looms large. There reasonably appears to be something ineffable and numinous.

Moreover, the cause for the existence of the whole system in itself cannot be circumscribed within natural explanation for it begs the very question: how did matter arise in the first place and simply saying there is some elementary particle or primal force won’t do as one is then led to an infinite regress of causes (c.f. Aquinas’s Cosmological argument) and there is no point at which the buck stops and yet science discerns a “beginning”, a big bang – so the origins of the universe, that is to say – what put the substance there or what put the substance in motion in the first place remains unanswered and appeal to the universe eternally existing as the Ancient Greeks argued defies modern science and proof. It seems there is need for a substance which is not simply physical, and the atheist would be hard-pressed to argue otherwise.

2. *The Believer*

The believer, by contrast is certain in his claim that God does exist and cares for all creatures and humanity in particular, guiding them with purpose and love. Such a belief is based on the following observations:

- The universe is cosmos, that is exhibits an inherent order and design and this immaculate precision – even considered in evolutionary terms – demonstrates the existence of an All-knowing and Intelligent Creator.
- To believe in God is the basis for a just society, individual conscience, and moral imperatives, without which man would run amok.
- The persistence of a spiritual or religious dimension in all cultures and through time and place suggests that there is an innate sensitivity towards the idea of God.
- To say that there is a God means that it is only in finite existence that God can take shape, for if God would just be the concept of that which is infinite, it would be neither perfect (lacking the attribute of finitude) nor all-powerful (impotent in the finite realm). This coheres with the Ontological argument for the existence of God.
- The existence of evil is explained as an instance of the poor use of man’s freewill which God grants humans, while suffering is simply a test or obstacle to assess the heart so to speak and a necessary mechanism to earn reward in an afterlife.

The advantage of such a belief – often extremely fervent – is that it provides solace in a capricious and transient world. It provides a certain stability in the vicissitudes of an often-tumultuous existence. It offers an ultimate explanation – a “why” that supersedes all the “what’s” and “how’s”, often giving individuals and societies a sense of purpose, meaning and destiny. It allows man to control nature as its guardian bequeathed to him by the Creator. The bible itself begins with the creation and tells man that he is to look after it and use it wisely.

Testimony from those deemed prophets or the wise or the seer and the like point to the possibility of transcendent experience. Icons such as Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, the Buddha and so on have had tremendous influence upon the great mass of humankind through recorded history. Such pioneers suggest that the essence of a person is ultimately spiritual, and that compassion and love are key elements in creating heaven on earth or at least attaining inner peace and tranquility.

The disadvantages, however, are also noteworthy. Religion and belief have caused untold misery and suffering, have caused tremendous divide between peoples and nations, and have often castigated all attempts to seek answers, often killing in the name of God or forestalling progress where dogmatic belief and doctrine reign supreme. Scientists, woman in general and the other that is in need of being civilized or converted, have all being undermined through religious belief sanctioned by a God and its church (or institutions in general) in order to wrought untold suffering, racism, bigotry, and violence in its wake.

Furthermore, the senseless adherence to such faith-based religions have stunted progress or have used technological savvy and artistic excellence as a tool or weapon to further their power and claims of being true. It is the steadfast belief in the truth of such a position come what may that kept the dark ages as just that for centuries. Of course, subsequent to the rise of modernism – the secular state; the university; a healthy skepticism viz. traditional “knowledge”, the liberation of women; the industrial and now the digital revolutions and the eroding of perennial values and so on – has meant that religious belief no longer holds ultimate sway, although one would be hard-pressed to deny its continual presence and the confidence with which many believe – and not just the extremists amongst “us”. It may be that a philosophical attitude would be the antidote to such conviction, though in the main I would argue that society is generally anti-intellectual and seeks the simplest path, rather than one of continuous questioning and doubt. This renders the “believer attitude” rather dangerous and replete with hidden hatreds and antagonism towards those that are not of the same tribe as it were and perhaps this is a universal disease.

3. *The Agnostic*

It may appear that the solution to the dichotomy that exists between atheist and believer is simply to take a position somewhat between both such poles, to exist in a state of uncertainty and doubt and put simply – not put one’s money on either side. This is the agnostic. To define it further:

- To be agnostic is to suspend an ultimate judgement toward either the atheist or the believer.
- It is to exist in doubt and to wait for more conclusive evidence before any commitment,
- It is to accept that there may be a God but that at the same time such a conception may have no ultimate justification.
- It is to deny that a conclusive proof as to the existence of God is ever possible, while maintaining that one’s own position as an agnostic is the most rational.
- That there is an epistemological impasse: it is simply not possible to *know* that God exists which is not to say it is impossible either.

The advantages of such an approach are that it avoids the kinds of extremism already levelled at the previous two positions. This is obviously an advantage as it is less likely to result in an approach that is fundamentalist and violent. On the other hand, it may lead to indifference and coldness especially when a stance one way or other or some kind of action might be required. For example: A believer may make the claim that God compelled him to do such and such and the agnostic may simply say – “well, maybe”- while the atheist will refute it. The “well, maybe” phrase is rather empty and lacks conviction and impetus and cannot be the basis for say a robust

constitution or bill of rights. This is so as the agnostic simply doubts while not standing for anything in particular.

In addition, the agnostic may settle on this skepticism and not make the effort to really look into the matter and decide. A decision necessarily entails “killing other options”, yet at the very least it propels a person to have an opinion about the matter or explore it more deeply. It would be like someone who wishes not to peer into philosophy on the pretext that it is just theory and speculation, and this would surely be a poverty of the intellect. On the other hand, a delayed response is a good executive function and necessary before the “facts” might be weighed up. However, at what point such a judgment might be made or if it is forever postponed is a sort of intellectual and emotional procrastination.

4. A fourth position

I would like to suggest a further option, a fourth position in the debate – in fact one which eschews the debate itself. In this sense, it is neither being that of an atheist, nor believer nor agnostic.

Now it is crucial that we do not have a name for this point of view. In fact, it is not really a point of view. It is more like the space in which things are allowed to be or occupy. It is not a category in itself. It is neither yin nor yang, nor the oscillation and dialectic between these polarities.

It is akin to water. Water has no shape or form. It cannot be punched or kicked. It may take the form of a vessel, but in itself it is formless. Or perhaps light is a better metaphor. It can change in intensity depending on the surfaces it encounters or the filtering mechanism, but in itself it remains the same.

To apply to the discussion at hand: To adhere to an identity --I am an atheist. I am a believer. I am an agnostic is the problem itself. Such identities limit oneself just as hard stone is fixed and immovable. In human terms, to hold on to an identity is to fix one’s definition of self and anything that opposes is an enemy, something to either destroy or to shield against. But the “fourth position” does nothing of the sort. It simply observes the debate. It is the yin-yang symbol, not an aspect thereof. It is a vacuum in which possibilities arise, yet not yielding to any eventuality, just as water flows and meanders down a river or in an ocean or as vapor without being an ocean, river or vapor – or ice for matter. The form is not the essence, only the quality of the water. As with light: the intensity may differ, but it is light all the same – even shadow, while being the absence of light can only be in relation to the figure that stands in the way of light. So with the “fourth position” – it is quality of the thing and not its formal manifestation, not its fixed identity as it assumes this or that form, but simply the potential, simply the motion and change just as dawn brings on the intensity of a hot summer day, declines and gives way to the night with only the small intense light of the moon and a few flickering stars – until tomorrow reveals yet another nuance. Fixating on only one such form, one fixed state of light or water is the error – rather it is the effervescent movement of the All. Believer, atheist, agnostic – all are one in the flow state of being, all of the same singular identity just as human beings while different are yet all constituted by the same stuff. As the pop star Sting once sang: “We share the same biology, regardless of ideology.” It is an attachment to a position that creates enmity.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have defined the position of the atheist, believer, and agnostic in a rudimentary way. I then gave an account of both the pros and cons of each position, noting that there is clearly no definite and satisfactory “truth” to any one side. The question of God’s existence or non-existence has been a perennial question in philosophy and one that most at some point in their lives have become a would-

be philosopher about such matters or at least either fit into organized religious structures to some extent. It was found that one can make equally valid claims on all fronts, and I concluded with the notion of a “fourth position” – though I again I reiterate that there is no actual title for such a position lest we simply create another “-ism” and another bolt in the debate. Rather, one can elide the wholedebate and question and in rather metaphysical terms – or even poetic – I used the metaphor of water and light to suggest a subtle conceptual schema that perhaps nullifies the disadvantages of the three positions, usually thought as the only rational options. The “fourth position” embraces all such options. It is the heart that accepts paradox, rather than reason that makes an enemy of all contradictions.