IRRATIONAL BELIEVINGS

Peter Cave

Peter Cave reflects on morality and belief in God.

Reason and religion do not make good bedfellows. The parent who praises God for saving her child from the tsunami is blind to the dispraise that God merits for letting thousands of others suffer and die. Believers who, in the name of their faith, help the poor and tend the sick need to have something to say about those many others, who, in the name of a different faith or even the same faith, deliberately bomb, torture and kill those with whom they disagree. If it is just a matter of faith, of belief in God, then – it would seem – anything goes.

Taking a leap of faith in God – or, even, a hop, skip or jump – immediately suggests that such leapers are going beyond that which reason, evidence and our humanity provide. If religious belief relies on such airborne transactions, such flighty flights, then there is the danger that any leap is as justified as any other – that is, the leaps possess no justification at all. Catholics and Protestants have maimed and killed each other in the name of their faith – as have Shi'ites and Sunnis. Moslems and Christians have tortured and killed each other because they have lacked the 'right' faith – and both groups have dished out similar horrendous treatment to the Jews, agnostics and atheists.

The danger of faith, of belief in God, can only be overcome if religious believers accept that reason, evidence and our humanity, at the very least, set some constraints, some limits, on what may be justified by religious belief. If they do so accept, then they are recognizing that those limits exist independently of particular religious faiths. This point coheres with Plato's in the *Euthyphro*, over two thousand years ago, from whence arguments are derived that our moral beliefs cannot ultimately be grounded in what religious texts and authorities announce. That a principle is set down in the Bible or the Qur'an is not what makes it a good principle, a principle of

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moral worth. A principle's moral worth stands independently of historical source.

Faith is dangerous. Perhaps that is why many believers do end up talking of evidence and reasons. But, once that is so, they should not complain when the evidence and reasons are assessed. Those who see in the world around them evidence of God, as a benevolent all-powerful being, should not ignore the immense sufferings of millions of humans and non-humans through natural disasters. Could not things have been otherwise? Could not God have created a world without such vast swathes of gratuitous suffering? The parent who praises God for saving her child should surely recognize that things could have been otherwise for the others who suffered: the tsunami did not have to happen. True, some believers may deny that things could have been otherwise; they may insist that what happens possesses a logical necessity. Apart from wondering what grounds they have for such a belief, we then have the puzzle of how the necessity coheres with God being a personal God, a creator, who judges and wills and merits worship.

These are typical puzzles that fall under the 'Problem of Evil', puzzles which may lead us to have sympathy for Devil. After all, the sufferings around us, if they point to anything at all, point as much to Devil as to God. Indeed, if we must point to anything beyond the world, then reason would suggest both Devil and God exist, more or less balanced in their powers. This is a Zoroastrian approach. Surprisingly, few people are Zoroastrians; though maybe that is not surprising at all, given that, if we need to point to a supernatural world, it would seem to be the stance with most reason. As said, reason and religion are not happy bedfellows.

That the world could have been otherwise (or so it seems) raises problems of rationality for typical religious believers. So, too, does the fact that religious believers could have believed otherwise. Let me introduce Sophie and Safia.

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1. Saints, Sinners and Suicide Bombers

Sophie is Christian; Safia is Muslim. Sophie grew up in Christianity and became more and more personally devoted to Jesus Christ's teachings. She worships and prays. She 'hears' the voice of Jesus. She relies on God concerning what is right and wrong, what she morally should and should not do. Sometimes she seeks guidance from others of her faith but they, in turn, rely on their communion with God or the communion of others with God, as described in the Bible. Sophie devotes considerable time to helping the underprivileged. She finds happiness in her religious life; we may say that she is blessed. Speaking somewhat loosely, Sophie is saintly.

All the above holds true of Safia, save she speaks of Allah instead of God, follows the teachings of Mohammed instead of Christ and relies on the Qur'an instead of the Bible. Safia too is, speaking even more loosely (given the Christian connotation), saintly.

Had Sophie and Safia been brought up differently – Sophie in Islam; Safia in Christianity – their religious beliefs, in all likelihood, would have been swapped. Imagine Sophie and Safia to be identical twins, with the same genetic inheritance, whose mother died at their birth. Through chance, they ended up being nurtured in the different religions. Had they, as babies, been switched, Safia would have been nurtured in Christianity and Sophie in Islam.

Are they not irrational in holding the religious beliefs they do? They know that, had circumstances been different, they would have held to different religions. Ought they not, then, to withdraw from their faith, from their particular religious beliefs? This may seem unimportant, given that both Sophie and Safia are kindly good people; but we are lucky in our example. Yes, Sophie and Safia understand the words of God and Allah, of Christ and Mohammed, of the Bible and Qur'an, respectively, in such a way that they seek peace, value kindness and perform charitable works. But think how things could have been radically different. Safia might have listened and heard that she should be a martyr for Islam, become a suicide bomber and

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kill hundreds of innocent people. Sophie would be appalled at the thought – but is she in any better position? She also bases her morality on her religious faith.

Had Sophie been in Safia's shoes (and maybe it is just chance that she is not), she too could be exposed to the injunction to become a suicide bomber. Wearing her Christian shoes centuries ago, Sophie would have been calling for the burning of witches, the slaughter of infidels and the forced conversion of Jews. Wearing her Christian shoes today and listening to the voice of God as understood by some, she could be supporting bombing raids known to cause tremendous injuries to innocent people. Reflect how, even today, many believers have it divinely revealed that homosexual acts are evil, contraception is wicked and a wife should obey her husband – while many other believers deny that God"s commands are like that at all.

This brings us back to the danger that exists when people base their moral beliefs – that is, their beliefs concerning how they should treat others and themselves – exclusively on an authority's voice. They run the risk of carrying out some highly immoral deeds and feeling themselves justified in performing those deeds. There is no guarantee concerning what an authority commands. Once believers recognize that there are conceivable circumstances in which it would be wrong for them



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to obey the authority, they recognize they have some moral beliefs that are independent of that authority. Indeed, it is the fact that many believers have moral beliefs not grounded in religious authority that often explains why they interpret their scriptures in such a way that the scriptures support those moral beliefs.

Believers may reply that even non-believers often base their morality on some authority – on the State, political creeds, parents' teachings or even teachings of philosophers. My reply is that submission to such authorities can be dangerous, unless the authorities are open to questioning, to reasoning and to respecting people and their feelings. Puzzles obviously persist concerning the basis of moral beliefs but, in general, there is significant agreement among people, in their everyday lives, about what is fundamentally right and wrong – an agreement that has no need of religious backing. That is not to say that non-believers never behave badly. It is not to deny that religious teaching has sometimes helped people to behave well. It is to insist that what is right and wrong cannot ultimately be understood in terms of what God or gods command, in terms of faith.

Returning to the irrationality of their faith, of their belief in God, Sophie and Safia both know that they would have believed very differently, would have been committed to different faiths and moral principles, had they been brought up differently. Those religious believers who recognize that must surely wonder why they retain their particular faith and base their life on it. Yet, maybe they have a reply. They may point out that, almost certainly, we believe that, however far we travel on the earth's surface, we shall not fall off the edge. But we surely agree that, had we been born many centuries ago, we might well have thought that people could fall off the edge. Even though we recognize that we should in all likelihood have held different beliefs about the world, had we been in radically different circumstances, that in no way undermines the beliefs that we hold today about such matters. So, why should such 'would have believed differently' considerations be expected to undermine the faith of believers?

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Our best response is that we recognize that, in those different circumstances many centuries ago, we lacked evidence about the shape of Earth, evidence that is now available. Where religious beliefs about God and the afterlife are concerned, based on scripture and revelations, is there much scope for showing how one set of scriptures or revelations provides better evidence than another? That is a puzzle for further reflection, but it clearly returns us to assessing the evidence, rather than to leaps of faith.

2. Atheists or believers for heaven?

Millions of people do, of course, believe in a traditional single God, be it the God of the Jews, of the Christians or Allah of the Muslims; and they want to go to heaven. Many, many believe that the way to achieve heaven is to obey God's commands. Perhaps this is to misunderstand the religious texts, but our puzzle arises from what many, many religious people believe, whether or not the belief is true. One godly command is a moral one – that we should help others – and, most importantly, that we should help others for their sake rather than as a means of gaining something for ourselves, such as advancing entry into heaven.

The puzzle over religious motivation suggests that atheists and agnostics are in a better position, with regard to heaven-entry through moral action, than reflective believers in God. Contrast Althea, an atheist, with Godfrey, a god-intoxicated, firmly-committed, believer. Althea possesses a strong sense of moral duty; she values improving the lives of others and seeks no reward in return. She is a good person. As an atheist, she certainly is not motivated by desire for, or hope of, heavenly eternal life. She would pass any moral test for heavenly entry.

What of Godfrey? He believes that, if he acts morally, he will reap the benefits of passing the moral test at heaven's gate. There are different versions of Godfrey's position; let us stay with one simple version.

Simple Godfrey was a pretty immoral character before he came to believe in God and grasp what God commanded. He

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began to understand that he must help others, for their own sake, as a necessary condition for his reaching the desired heavenly end. 'But,' he reasoned, 'there is then no point in my helping others, because what is leading me to do this is my desire for heaven (or fear of hell) and that makes the whole point ... er ... pointless. To pass the heaven test, I need to act morally, without any self-interested motivation, yet I am considering what is best for me to do to pass the heaven test and improve my chances of a heavenly afterlife. So anything I do, as a result of such reflections, is motivated by self-interest. My simple aim of achieving heaven seems, paradoxically, to prevent my doing what is required for heaven.'

There are, no doubt, some entrance conditions to heaven, in addition to those concerning moral motivation – assuming there is sense in the idea of entrance conditions. These conditions may well affect atheists and believers differently. On the one hand, atheists may have an even greater chance of heaven than believers if, for example, God sets lower standards on behaviour for those unaware of his laws than for those who are aware. On the other hand, believers may be better off than atheists because, presumably, conditions for heavenly entry may also include belief in God, worship of God and even certain rituals – all, by the way, rather unfair conditions for atheists who genuinely cannot feel justified in believing in God. One further condition could be that of wittingly obeying God's commands, which raises another motivational puzzle akin to the one already presented: God's commands include our treating others well for their sake – and probably not because God has so commanded.

Being motivated by God's commands and being motivated by a heavenly afterlife need not contaminate being motivated by the plight of others. People can be genuinely motivated to help others for their own sake and be genuinely motivated to do what is required to reach heaven, yet, because they are unaware of the link between the two, there is no puzzle: they simply do not realize that helping others is a means of increasing heavenly chances. Godfrey may be able to take this path of ignorance. He could set about helping people, albeit

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with the wrong motives yet, over time, come genuinely to be helping them for their sake, because he forgets the link with heavenly entry and how he got started on the path.

More likely, Godfrey ends up helping others – and for the right reason as far as he can tell – but he worries about how this ties in with his behaviour apparently also helping him to get where he wants: heaven. Is there a genuine problem here? For Godfrey to have the right motivation, we need him to help others, even without the consequence of the increased likelihood of heaven – even if, indeed, there were no God. As Godfrey is a seriously committed religious believer, can he make sense of such a possibility: of there being no God; of not wanting to go to heaven? If he is unable to make sense of it, how can he assess what he would still do in, for him, such a senseless world?

The answer perhaps is that no requirement exists for him to be able to carry out the 'Would I still?' test, just that it be possible for someone to carry it out about him. Step forth the atheist – now, arguably (albeit paradoxically) again in a better position than a believer to evaluate the believer's true motivation.

3. Belief in God

In the above we have readily switched between talk of faith, of belief in God and of belief that God exists. That religious belief in God as benevolent and all powerful can be sustained, despite the vast sufferings in the world, despite the irrationality of the belief, despite the dangers of the belief, suggests that religious belief is dissimilar from typical beliefs.

Suppose I hold firm to my belief that Clarissa loves me, even though she has never shown any signs of such love and even though, as I continue to pursue her, her rejection of me becomes more and more vehement – sending her husband round, calling the police, finally taking me to court as a stalker. At some stage, should we not accept that my 'belief' is no longer a belief? It is no longer responsive to evidence and reason. Rather, my so-called belief is more like a desperate hope, a passion or even a condition calling for medical

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attention. Maybe we should take seriously the thought that religious belief, rather like my belief in Clarissa's love, is more like a passion, hope or way of seeing the world, rather than anything grounded in evidence – though that still leaves us with the unhappy reflection that some religious ways of seeing the world we must flee.

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As the above shows, religious believers have not only to confront the world's woes, but also to explain the moral basis for their scriptural interpretations, why they cling to a faith when they could so easily have been clinging differently, and how their motivations are moral, given the desire for heavenly entry. All this suggests that there is both more – and less – to religions than meets the eye. More, in that religions need somehow to accommodate these irrationalities. Less, in that maybe the best way of handling these irrationalities is to understand religious belief as paradoxically involving no true belief in the existence of any transcendent all-powerful beings at all.

Some paragraphs above are extracts from Can A Robot Be Human? 33 Perplexing Philosophy Puzzles *(Oxford: Oneworld, 2007). Further discussion of the puzzles and of many other paradoxes and perplexities appear in that work and also in* Humanism *(Oxford: Oneworld, forthcoming). Peter Cave is a member of the Humanist Philosophers' Group and lectures for The Open University.*

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