AN ATHEIST’S GUIDE TO THE DIVINE: THROWING OUT THE BATHWATER BUT KEEPING THE BABY

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Abstract

It is suggested that the enduring universality and intuitively compelling quality of belief in God is reflective not of its veracity but of the fact that it is simply human nature to believe. The present paper argues that the preoccupation with external spiritual entities, along with the universal propensity to take these reified projections literally, has diverted us from the more constructive task of fostering personal, spiritual transformation via a focus on the religiogenic object representations that underlie these projections. An object relations approach is used to redefine spirituality in a way that shifts the focus from external referents to internal psychic realities. Briefly discussed is a model of ego development that frames transcendence as an ego experience rather than a metaphysical statement, faith as an attitude rather than a belief, and the experience of God as an entirely internal process. Also addressed are the implications of recent work pointing to the existence of two processing systems, one of which enables us to function in the material world, the other in the world of relationships, including a relationship with one’s religiogenic internal object representation (i.e., the God image).

Keywords: God, spiritual, religiogenic object representations, atheist, faith as an attitude

Why We Believe

There are a number of compelling reasons to believe in the existence of God. Four reasons are discussed below.

Belief in God is One of the More Universal and Enduring Beliefs in Human History

Belief in God has been, and continues to be, so widespread that one might be inclined to say that this alone makes the case. How could so many billions of people be wrong? But might the universality of belief in God be a reflection not of the veracity of the belief but of the fact that it is simply

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human nature to believe? Throughout history human beings have had many beliefs that were widely held for long periods of time, like the belief that the earth is flat, that the earth is the center of the universe, and that erratic or crazy behavior is the result of evil spirits or demonic possession. These are all beliefs that, in the absence of information to the contrary, might seem intuitively obvious. The earth does appear flat, the sun does appear to revolve around the earth, and aberrant behavior really does appear to be best explained as possession by a foreign agent like a spirit or demon. As our scientific understanding of the world has progressed, these and many other commonly-held beliefs have fallen by the wayside as they have been replaced by other scientifically-based beliefs. The fact that a belief is popular is not in-and-of-itself a sufficient argument for its veracity. As shall be seen below, belief in God and other spiritual phenomena (e.g., creation, souls, the afterlife, etc.) may simply be a human propensity that people retain throughout their life unless they are overridden by the development of other beliefs that conflict with them.

The Complexity and Beauty of the World

How else can we explain how our incomprehensibly complex world came to be, how it functions so beautifully, and how it seems to suit human needs so well other than as the result of its having been designed or created? The world is indeed astonishing in its complexity, as well as in its uncanny suitability for our physical needs (this is more noticeable when compared to other environments like the moon or the bottom of the ocean). The idea that this world was created for us seems like the intuitively obvious explanation.

But an understanding of evolutionary theory points to a different explanation. While the world does indeed seem as if it were made for us, it is important to keep in mind that this is the world that we (at least our ancestors) evolved into. The fact that the level of oxygen in the air happens to be pretty close to what human beings ideally need for survival is a result of the fact that our bodies evolved to fit that reality and not the other way around. Similarly, the abundance of appealing sources of nutrition all around us is not a result of the world being created to fit our needs; it too is a result of our ancestors evolving to fit the world they lived in. Those ancestors of ours who did not find the plants and animals around them gustatorily appealing probably did not get enough nutrition to survive. As a result, they were replaced in the battle for gene dominance by those ancestors of ours who did.