

To Believe or not to Believe? The Untold Story of the Agnostic

Bradley Allsop

Atheist Sean Penn, in one of his gripping 'webisodes', boldly opens one day by claiming that there is no such thing as an agnostic- that they are all really atheists. His point is that an atheist is someone who does not *believe* in a God, as opposed to the agnostic stance of not *knowing*. No one really knows, he says, but theism and atheism deal with *belief*, and if you're 'not sure' whether there's a God, to him that's the same as not believing that there is. A.C Grayling made a similar point in his talk at a recent AHS conference, stating that atheism is not 'believing there isn't a God', but rather 'not believing there is a God'. Re-read it, there is an, apparently important, distinction.

So where does this leave the agnostic? Should we all just bite the bullet and embrace atheism, as by not being sure, we surely do not currently believe in a God? If only it were that simple. The main problem with the above is one which plagues any debate concerning religion and secularism: reasoning. Mr Penn is making an assumption that the human mind is logical and reasonable, he's assuming that this holds even when our minds are exploring a concept that is for all intents and purposes squarely outside the boundaries of such notions. He is assuming there is a firm divide between belief and lack of.

Agnosticism is the often untold story, forgotten or drowned out by fevered religious exhortations and rabid atheist postulations. Agnostics are often seen as not having much to offer the debate, being by definition rather uncertain about things. This can, however, lead to the debate at times becoming rather skewed, swinging between moral condemnations from pompous theists, to arrogant sneering from haughty atheists. Perhaps an understanding of why some agnostics remain as they do can help encourage a more balanced perception of both sides. Perhaps agnosticism *does* have something to add to the debate after all.

Penn and Grayling's reasonable approach to the topic assumes a likewise equally rational and understandable approach from all, but sadly this is not the case. I'm an agnostic because I'm confused. I'm an agnostic because I do not know the answers to these cosmic and eternal questions, but also because I do not know my own mind: belief and non-belief is not a binary, it's a continuum. Some days God and religion seems plausible and appealing, other days they don't: should I therefore call myself atheist one day and theist the next? Or should we accept that there is not a firmly policed line, despite the best intentions of both sides?

My agnosticism extends far beyond just pondering the existence of a deity or indeed historical figures. It wrestles with the benefits and the drawbacks of organised religion, with tradition and authority and hierarchy, and with whether I could ever reconcile faith with my otherwise science-orientated mind. Let me explain.

It is popular now to say that you're not *religious*, but rather *spiritual*. Indeed, it is popular for the scholar and layman alike to define the distinction between the two as religion being organised and impersonal, whereas the spiritual is personal and private. Paragament (1999) cautions against this dichotomy, for he believes it really suggests that religion is bad and spirituality good, also ignoring the complexities of both (there are many spiritual practices within religion, for instance). This may not be an entirely accurate conception. Protestantism is often linked to the rise in individualism in the West, sowing the seeds for capitalism and modern society, whereas many 'spiritual' practices such as meditation that have gained popularity in the West actually seek to deny the very idea of the Self, to create a greater harmony with those around us or some cosmic entity. Hodge & McGrew (2006) found 9 definitions for spirituality and 12 for religion during telephone surveys, suggesting

that, conversely, if the term 'religion' generates a greater disparity in understandings, it may be the more personal of the two.

Levin (2001) explains how certain religious practices can be quite healthy, such as Muslim and Jewish dietary requirements and Mormons rejection of alcohol and smoking. Jonathan Haidt in his ground breaking book on moral psychology '*The Righteous Mind*' points to research that suggests that those individuals of a religious bent are much more likely to be active in their communities, and more likely to donate time, money and even blood than their secular counterparts. Even Susan Blackmore, of the Dawkins/Dennett mindset of religion as a 'virus' (an unfortunate foray of an otherwise brilliant expansion of the theory of memetics) has retracted her claims in recent years, accepting that, by and large, religious people seem to live longer, healthier and happier lives.

Haidt's grand thesis goes on to suggest that there are 6 universal and fundamental moral foundations that human morality is based upon: Care, Liberty, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority and Sanctity. He believes that religion is entwined with the last 3 particularly, and that any attempt to understand it without an appreciation of the social utility that these 3 foundations have is doomed to failure: simply critiquing the plausibility of a deity is always going to miss the mark for religious people because their religion is about more than just God. The sense of community, companionship and belonging derived from religious communities is an integral part to its allure, and a genuine social good that cannot be dismissed.

And yet I cannot ignore the many examples of religion being stuck in a regressive, oppressive past, with Christianity and Islam's stances on homosexuality and gender equality being brought to mind, as well as the highly restricting nature of many Amish communities and their counterparts and lesser examples being prevalent in many other religions and places. What of the appalling actions of ISIS? To be sure these fundamentalists are in no way representative of mainstream Islam, but it would be wrong to deny that religion plays a part in their ideology. And what of an organisation that *is* representative of a religion? The Vatican, I'm sure, has provided solace to many practising Catholics throughout the centuries, but it also has a history mired by deceit, corruption and hypocrisy, as well as being a great source of suffering throughout medieval Europe.

Needless to say, my views on the usefulness and morality of organised religion are mixed and confused. As naturally left-of-centre politically I have an inherent (and, I believe, healthy) distrust of authority and hierarchy, but through reading Haidt's work and personal experience I can sort of see why they are useful and beneficial things for society to have, in moderation. Does this mean I must take the atheist proclamation of complete freedom of thought and a breakdown of religious hierarchies and inhibitions with a pinch of salt? They are arguments that naturally appeal to my sense of justice and aversion to oppression, but in their extreme they may risk losing something in their hunger for liberation.

And what of the underlying mentality of religion, its hidden driver: faith? Is it virtue or vice? Many times I have shared the atheist's exasperation at the unthinking nature of many religious beliefs and practices. The Enlightenment really did free our minds and provide a powerful catalyst for an explosion in scientific and philosophical progress. The old adage of Socrates that '*the unexamined life is not worth living*' speaks strongly to me, and the audacity of questioning established orthodoxies to me is a noble and important contribution from atheism. I can, however, also see some merit to faith: often having faith is portrayed as a commendable attribute and I can sort of

understand why, if only in certain circumstances. *Blind* faith feels distinctly wrong to me, but this caricature of the religious zealot is, in my experience, not all that common. Most (although perhaps not all) religious people I have met seem to have *something* to base their faith on, it is just often something that the atheist finds easy to dismiss.

Some, in true Aristotelian fashion, offer a third way, explaining that religion and belief served a purpose for a time, but just as feudalism paved the way for capitalism, the time of invoking deities and mysticism in order to understand the world is over now- science has got it covered. But even this apparent compromise still falls down on the side of relegating faith to a mode of thinking that must be overcome. So which is it? Is faith a vital aspect of the human condition for understanding the world and developing oneself, or an unacceptable betrayal of human intellect and ability?

Many, though I'm sure not all, atheists presume their school of thought has a monopoly on logic and reason, whilst religion is the bastion of superstition and blind faith. This dichotomy is simply false. Many thinkers traditionally associated with the Enlightenment, that great social innovation that placed reason and evidence on the throne of human thought, were firm believers in the Judea-Christian God (just have a brief read of Burke, Locke or Hobbes). The 'Ancient Enlightenment' that saw figures such as the Buddha and Socrates place reason above all else was also plagued by religious believers. Although Socrates was not beyond questioning the Gods, he seems not to have questioned much their existence, with some scholars even suggesting that he believed himself to be on a 'divine mission'. Even today many scientists hold firm beliefs in a God, and many atheists choose to place their faith in *something*, even if it is not a deity.

The traditional antithesis to faith is often seen to be empiricism: acquiring knowledge of the world through observation and evidence. Thus is the image of Darwin conjured up, collecting his samples on the Galapagos Islands, back bent and magnifying glass in hand. Whilst I consider myself a scientist, I am still perfectly happy to accept that empiricism itself rests upon an assumption that is taken as a matter of faith by even the most ardent of scientists. Quite simply we *assume* that observation is the best way to understand the universe, without any real robust defence for doing so. We have *faith* in the explanatory and predicative ability of empiricism, but we have no way, ironically, of empirically proving that it is better than anything else. Indeed, evidence we *do* have suggests a rather different conclusion.

The idea of rational, objective human beings has been eroded away slowly by a wealth of psychological and sociological revelations. Culture, language, political and religious ideology, power relations, and social conventions as well as many other factors can all wield a powerful and often invisible influence over research, and act to undermine this false sense of objective impersonality that science often parades under (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). But psychology has revealed deeper threats to humanity's capacity for empiricism than this. One need only be vaguely familiar with recent advances in; reasoning (Kahneman, 2008); eye-witness testimony (Malpass & Devine, 1981, Siegelle & Loftus, 1978); visual perception (Balci & Dunning, 2006), unconscious processes (Wilson, 2003) and attention (Lavie, 2005) to name but a few to realise just how fundamental an objection to our empirical capacities modern psychology has raised. Through all of these and more we are prevented from seeing an exact, objective reality.

But assuming we could somehow transcend these inherent 'flaws' in our epistemological capabilities, would empiricism then have its day? The startling revelations of quantum physics have

shown us empirically that the observer matters, that the very act of observation itself changes reality (Rae, 2004). As the saying goes, if you think you understand quantum mechanics then you definitely don't, but one thing we can be sure in is that it has dispelled the myth of a detached, neutral observer, merely recording how the universe is going by without exerting any influence at all. Whilst it is still unclear just how quantum events relate to macroscopic objects (i.e humans) it is already offering profound challenges for the studios Darwins of the world.

But what of all the progress that the empirical method has brought about? Since freeing ourselves from dogmatic adherence to religious orthodoxy (or at the very least, those who sought to abuse it), we certainly do, as already mentioned, seem to have made incredible advances in almost all fields of human endeavour. This certainly shows that empiricism has *value* but it in no way proves that it is the only, or even the best, way of exploring and understanding the universe. It is perfectly possible that there are a set number of things empiricism can discover, whilst many more may lie outside of its limitations. We have made great progress in the realms that empiricism can explore, but what of outside these areas? Quite simply, we may not even know what it is we don't know.

Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahnemann in his book 'Thinking: Fast and Slow' describes our 'shortcomings' with a beautifully simplistic analogy. Our minds work in two ways- System 1 and System 2. System 1 is what is driving us most of the time- it guides us through our daily lives, helping us perform the majority of our tasks, navigating our environments with our pre-programmed 'world-view'. It is only when something contrary to our world view is shoved in our faces, or we stumble across something that requires a bit more thought (such as, hopefully, reading this) that System 2 kicks in. This is the part of our mind that deduces, that reasons, and the result of this reasoning is an altered 'world-view' operating system for System 1.

Piaget called this a process of assimilation and accommodation and this is telling. When you *accommodate* something in your world view, it means you have to make room for it, rejigging what was already there. But when you *assimilate*, you're not really changing anything, you're bending the information to your world-view. And how often do we do this? How often do we allow, without even realising it, our System 1 to completely bypass contrary information. Studies show we are more likely to acknowledge information that confirms our views, whilst gloss over that that does not. Important work by Ash shows that we alter our views based on societal pressure, and Milgram infamously showed how we do this in deference to authority. There is a wealth of psychological research out there to show how identifying with a certain social group alters our perceptions of those both in and out of the group. The field of 'visual perception' has made some amazing discoveries about how easy it can be to trick a human being into seeing something that isn't there, or not seeing something that is.

Does accepting our limited capacity for reasoning allow room for faith? It may not prove the virtue of faith, but it certainly evidences its inevitability. Humans are by nature a curious breed: we have to know, to explore, to *discover*. If, however, we have a limited capacity in what we can determine empirically, then we will simply have to opt to believe or have faith in certain things, or risk being paralysed by indecision. Many researchers have discarded the old notion that emotion is opposed to reason, opting to see emotion rather as something that can work in tandem with reason: if we did not have emotions we would be often be unable to act, or we would make very socially

unacceptable decisions. Could faith also come to be understood as an accompaniment, rather than an adversary, of reason, like emotions have?

Faith can also play an important role in directing our behaviour. Whilst uneasy about a faith in a supreme deity that is devoid of evidence or even reason, I must admit that I do not apply this uneasiness equally. Part of me feels the pull of the stirring defence of reason and empiricism, and the Latin phrase 'Sapere Aude' (dare to know) resonates strongly with me: I admire the atheists that fight for freedom of thought and speech and refuse to accept limits to what we can do. But I do have faith in certain things. I have a rather unusual but equally unshakable faith in humans. I believe that both on an individual and a species level that we can be a force for good, and deserve another chance no matter how depraved our sins (interesting choice of word for an agnostic). I have precious little evidence on which to base this on (indeed, after obtaining a Psychology degree I have plenty to the contrary) but it remains with me nonetheless. I could be completely wrong about this, but it doesn't really matter, because it is how it makes me act that is important. This faith, whether misplaced or not, means I approach fellow human beings, most of the time, believing that they can be a force for good and treat them accordingly.

So, despite Penn's and Grayling's protestations, I am truly an agnostic, at least for the time being. Because of the questions raging in my mind and the convoluted, confusing nature of the human condition, it is not a simple case of either believing or not believing. I do not truly know the answers to these questions about God's existence, nor about whether faith is a good or a bad thing, nor whether religion does actually have something to offer us... but I also do not even know my own mind when it comes to them. Some of us, although we may be a smaller subset than is often realised, genuinely don't fall into the category of belief or non-belief, or at least our conscious selves don't (who knows what's going on in the unconscious: can you have an unconscious belief?). Some of us are genuinely stuck in some sort of murky, muddled middle ground, unsure of our own opinions or even our own minds.

Timothy Wilson talks of how we are 'Strangers to Ourselves' (as his book is titled), how we often are unaware of a large part of what's going on in our own minds, how small a role our consciousness can play. Kahnemann too, in his talk of System 1 and System 2 highlights how small a segment of human thought reasoning actually takes up and Jonathan Haidt demonstrates how much of what we call reasoning is merely post hoc confabulations to defend a viewpoint reached by automatic, often emotive means. Could it be possible, in light of these theories, that we can come sometimes to not really understand our own beliefs, and therefore truly be agnostic? And can an understanding of how this is so also translate into an important point to bear in mind when considering the virtue of faith in an uncertain world? As ever, I am still unsure, but hopefully you can begin to reach towards some conclusions for yourself.